NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

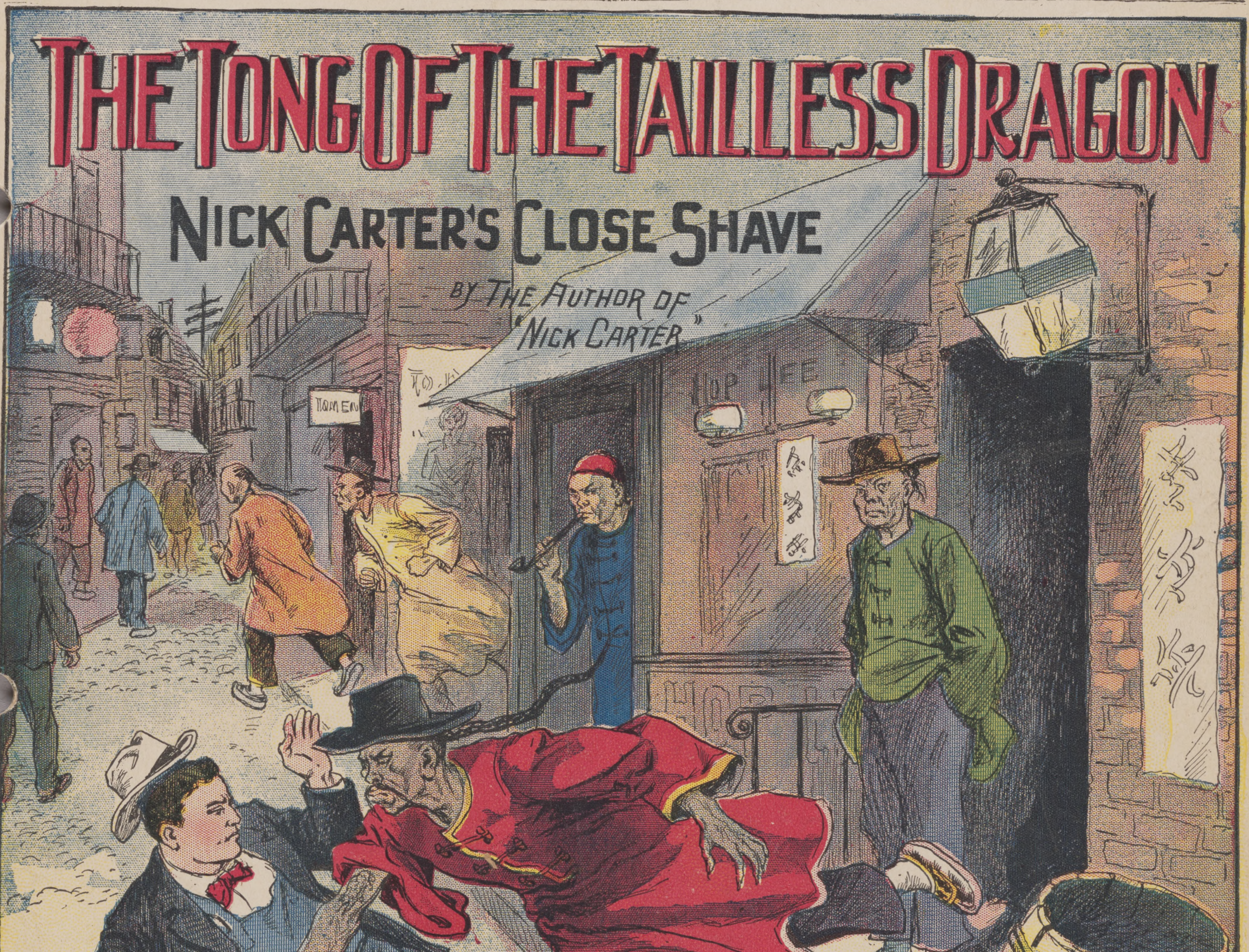
Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave.,* N. Y.

No. 480 NEW YORK, MARCH 10, 1906. **Price, Five Cents**

THE TONG OF THE TAILLESS DRAGON

NICK CARTER'S CLOSE SHAVE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER."



A tall, muscular Mongolian came out of an opium-joint with such precipitation that he collided violently with the detective. Nick went down with the Chinaman on top of him.

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The Tong of the Tailless Dragon;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CLOSE SHAVE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A TRAGIC MYSTERY.

"Just my luck!" exclaimed the nervous, pessimistic passenger as the steamship struck the rocks. "I never set out to do an important thing but something happened to knock my glittering prospects into a cocked hat. Now it is either an eternal resting-place at the bottom of the bay or the back track to San Francisco and the loss of the opportunity of a lifetime."

Amid the excitement then prevailing he stood amidships on the hurricane-deck and gazed with frowning face at the groups of frightened people gathered along the rail.

A strongly built man, whose countenance expressed power, intelligence, and acuteness, left the captain, with whom he had been conversing, to be accosted by a beautiful young woman who was steadying herself by the door of one of the staterooms.

Her voice trembled slightly as she asked:

"Is the danger great? Do you think we will be saved?"

"There is little danger, and we will be saved," was the cheery answer. "We have met with a severe accident and cannot proceed, but as there is no wind the ship is not likely to pound to pieces upon the rocks. Distress signals have already been displayed and calls sounded, and in an hour at the latest tugs should be here to take us all to land."

The young woman's face brightened. She smiled. "I am so glad." She paused a moment, then added: "I am so glad that I shall be obliged to return to San Francisco."

To this strange speech the man who had dispelled her anxiety experienced curiosity, but did not express it.

But the speaker was young and she was confiding.

And she felt that her confidence would not be misplaced, for the man's face inspired trust.

"I took passage on this boat for Honolulu," she said, "and up to yesterday I supposed that my uncle was to accompany me, but some important business necessitated his staying in the city until the departure of the next steamer. I wanted to stay with him, but he would not have it so. My aunt, he said, would be expecting me, and I must not disappoint her. Well, she will be disappointed, and even if there is no fog when the next boat starts I shall not be a passenger."

The man was about to say something when the young woman went on: "Don't think I am afraid because of this accident, viewed simply as an accident. To you it may mean one thing, having no significance out of the ordinary. To me it spells a warning, perhaps something more." Her voice quavered and her lips trembled. "I don't know now why I am saying this to you, but I believe you are a good man and that you will try to understand me."

"I hope you do not fear that your uncle has met with some serious disappointment," said the man gently.

"I am uneasy," she replied. "It has come to my mind that he was very nervous when he parted with me. He did not tell me what was the nature of the business that was keeping him in San Francisco, and I fear it had in it an element of danger. I wish I had refused to go on without him."

She brought out her handkerchief and wiped the gathering tears from her eyes.

The excitement on deck had now subsided, thanks to the encouraging words spoken by the captain.

The steamer had left the wharf in San Francisco that morning while the bay was enveloped in dense fog.

The pilot did his best to keep the boat in the path of safety, but the fog was impenetrable, and despite his efforts the steamer, with its hundreds of passengers, went out of her course and struck the concealed rocks near Fort Point, not far from the Golden Gate.

Owing to a delay, which was never satisfactorily accounted for, the tugboats did not show themselves until darkness was setting in. Some of the more daring among the passengers left the steamer that night, but it was not until late in the forenoon of the next day that the work of rescue was fully accomplished.

The young woman and the man who had been the recipient of her confidence were among those who were the last to leave the boat. Upon reaching the wharf the man found a cab, and the two were driven to the Palace Hotel, the temporary abode of her uncle.

Arrived there, the young woman's escort would have left her had she not, much to his satisfaction, earnestly requested him to remain in the office until after she made some necessary inquiries.

A few words with the clerk caused her face to turn pale with fear. Addressing her escort, she said, with a poor attempt at self-possession: "My uncle is not in his apartments."

There was nothing alarming in the bare statement. But the man divined that there was something behind it.

"Let us go over to that alcove," he said kindly, "and consider the matter."

When they were seated he continued: "It is best, I think, that we should come to a full understanding. You do not know me and——"

"And yet I trust you," she impulsively interrupted. "Your face is a passport to my good graces."

The man's heart glowed at the words. "I shall try to deserve your trust," he replied simply. "But you should know who I am. My name is Nicholas Carter."

"The great detective?" Surprise and pleasure shone in her eyes.

"The detective without the great," said Nick quietly. She shook her head and he went on soberly: "It may be that I can assist you; that is, if your story shall prove that you are in need of assistance."

"I am in need of it," was her earnest reply. The fear of some unknown calamity had not left her, but with the announcement of her companion's name and profession had come a feeling that, if any man in the world could give her aid and comfort, Nick Carter was that man.

"My name is Florence Garth," she continued, "and I am an orphan. My uncle, Fabius Winton, is my only relative, and I have lived with him since childhood. Our home is in Honolulu, and three months ago we came to San Francisco. My uncle had business to transact, business which might occupy months of his time. My aunt by marriage—she has been Mrs. Winton but a few years—declined to accompany us. Four days ago uncle said that, as all his business had been attended to, we could leave for the islands on the next steamer.

"The tickets were bought and berths secured the same day. My uncle was then in the best of spirits. But the day before the departure of the steamer he appeared ill at ease. He did not confide in me, but, when he told me that he would not be able to go on the boat as arranged, I asked the reason. Without looking me in the face he said that an unforeseen complication in a business matter had arisen, and that he must stay in San Francisco until it had been straightened out.

"As I have already told you, I wished to remain behind with him, but he insisted on my departure. He acted very queerly when he bade me good-by, and he actually made a movement toward the gangplank just as the wharfmen were about to raise it, but stopped suddenly, shook his head and walked rapidly away. I think that for one moment it was in his mind to board the steamer, go on to Honolulu, and let the business take care of itself."

"Your opinion is probably the right one," said Nick.

Miss Garth sighed. "It would have been better for him, better for me had I obeyed the impulse," she said, "for now he has disappeared and under circumstances that distress me greatly. He"—she blushed and turned her face away—"he went away with a woman."

Nick Carter's fine face grew grave.

"The chief clerk of this hotel informed me that he returned from the wharf shortly before noon, that he remained in his apartments all that day, and that between eleven and twelve o'clock at night a message was brought to him. He read it, came down-stairs, and found awaiting him in the court a veiled woman. They went away together."

She paused, and the detective hastened to speak these words of comfort: "A business man has dealings with women as well as with men. The fact that your uncle left the hotel with a person of your sex does not necessarily imply that there was anything improper in the proceeding."

"But he has not returned. That is very strange."

"H'm. And is that all?"

"Yes, and no."

Nick looked at Miss Garth inquiringly.

"I have told you all that has direct reference to my uncle's movements," she explained, "but there is something which to my mind has a bearing on the case. A month ago—if you are a close reader of the newspapers perhaps you may remember it—a wealthy mining man disappeared from another hotel in this city under circumstances similar to these in the case of my uncle. He left the hotel accompanied by a veiled woman. A week afterward his dead body was found in an unoccupied house in the Potrere district."

She shuddered as she spoke and her dark eyes sought Nick's face in search of comfort.

"Coincidences more remarkable than this occur every day," said the great detective consolingly. "Veiled women are not a rarity in San Francisco. Wind and sand are not good for the complexion, and the women of this city know it. Come," he went on, "let us hope for the best. Urgent business may have taken your uncle out of town. He may return this evening, or to-morrow at the latest. Look on the bright side. Engage your rooms, go to them, and leave the affair in my hands. I will make inquiries and report to you this evening."

Miss Garth was glad to accept Nick Carter's services, and his advice was at once taken.

Left alone the detective's countenance became serious. He had tried to lighten the gloom that shadowed the spirits of the beautiful Honolulan, but he had failed to convince himself that there was a bright side to the absence of Fabius Winton.

If he had explained the reason of his presence on the steamer, a passenger for Honolulu, her fears for the safety of her uncle would have been augmented.

Nick was in pursuit of a man and woman accounted to be two of the cleverest and most dangerous criminals in the United States.

Their specialty was kidnaping, for the purpose of blackmail, and more than one murder had been laid to their door. The detective had traced them from Chicago to St. Louis, and there for a time the trail had been lost. The kidnaping and murder of the millionaire miner in San Francisco, referred to by Florence Garth, had informed Nick that the villainous pair had gone to the Pacific Coast, and he had lost no time in making the trip across the continent.

Arrived in San Francisco he received from the chief of police the information, claimed to be positive, that Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters had sailed for the Sandwich Islands.

Now, with the evidence before him, Nick believed that the man and woman were still in San Francisco and that they had added another crime to the one of a month ago.

All afternoon the detective made systematic investigation, with a view of discovering the direction taken by Winton and the veiled woman after leaving the Palace Hotel.

At last he found a car-driver who imparted the information that a man and woman answering the descriptions Nick had furnished had left his car about halfway to Golden Gate Park. He thought they had alighted at Laguna Street, but wasn't sure.

Inquiries made on Laguna Street and in the neighborhood were fruitless until Nick encountered a sharp-faced lad of twelve, who was flying a kite in an alley.

In answer to the detective's question the boy said: "Did I see them? Sure Mike."

A quarter was placed in the little fellow's palm. "Do you know where they went?" asked Nick.

"I know dey chased along two blocks an' den dey did der vanishin' act widout chargin' a bean."

"Vanished, did they? Tell me all about it?"

The lad looked at Nick from head to foot. "Is you a copper?" he said.

"I am a friend of the man who was with the woman, my boy.'

The boy gave a searching scrutiny of the detective's countenance. Then came these words: "Dat's all right, mister, and I hands out der dope. I'll put youse wise to de limit of me clock. Here I was, den, when dey passes me, aimin' fer dat dinky alley which cuts troo two blocks. I wouldn't er paid no attention to de couple if de dame hadn't dropped a wipe, one o' dem lace dufunnies dat de actresses flashes in de vodderville. I didn't trun me lamps on it until de pair had got over a block away. Den I hikes after 'em thinkin' dere was a nickel in de dame.

"Wen dey turns de last corner, two blocks down, so's ter come on de wide cross-street, I was not more dan twenny feet behind. I meanders to de corner, an' wat does I see? Nuttin. De street for a block eider way was clear. Not a two-legger in sight."

"The man and woman probably went into the corner house," suggested Nick.

"Not on yer cranberry. De house is vacant."

"The house adjoining, then."

"Dere ain't no house er jinin'. Dere's a big vacant lot."

"Where did they go, then? Have you any idea?" asked the detective.

"Dey didn't go off in no automobile an' dey didn't take a cab, a hack, or a carriage. An' I didn't lamp no balloon. I reckons dey nacherly vanished de way I seen 'em do at de Orpheum."

Nick left the boy and walked down to the corner around which the man and woman had turned to be seen no more.

The vacant house, a plain, two-story structure, occupied his attention for a short time. He found several things worthy of note. There was a basement and it was reached from the outside by stone steps.

Descending the steps he tried the door softly, to find it locked.

In front of the house were two large, wide-spreading maples, which cut off the view from the opposite side of the street.

Beyond the house was a vacant lot covered with trees and shrubbery which obstructed the view from the buildings at the farther side of it.

The detective could form but one conclusion. Fabius Winton and the veiled woman had entered the vacant house. Perhaps they were now in there.

If danger threatened the wealthy Honolulan, and there was every reason to think so, measures for his rescue ought to be taken at once.

Nick went on a block, found a policeman, made a partial explanation of the situation, and secured the officer's services for an investigation of the house.

Entrance was effected by way of the basement door, which had to be forced open, as it was bolted on the inside.

The detective and the policeman stepped into a large apartment bare of furniture. The floor was covered with thick dust, and Nick was looking at footprints which led to one of the rooms in the rear, when a low groan fell upon his ears.

In an instant he was at the door of the room from whence the sound proceeded.

The door was locked, but the combined force of the two men quickly shattered it.

The room they entered was small, the shade of the one window was down, and on account of the darkness nothing could be seen.

The detective stepped to the window and raised the shade.

Now he could see everything that the room contained. Upon shelves and piled on the floor was a most remarkable collection of the weapons and tools of theft and murder.

But Nick soon had eyes for something else, for the body of a man was lying in a corner in a pool of blood.

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOT THICKENS.

"Murder," said the policeman, as he looked at the body, "and it's your man Winton, I reckon."

"No," answered the detective, "the man is not Winton."

He bent over the body and lifted one of the limp hands. "He is a stranger and he is done for. He can't live but a short time. His skull has been crushed with a hammer. And there is the weapon," he added, pointing to a blood-and-hair-matted object by the side of th victim.

There was water in the basement, and while the policeman was gone to notify the chief of police, Nick washed the blood from the dying man's face and stanched the flow from the gaping wound in the head.

The effect of these ministrations was immediate. The man opened his eyes. But there was no light of reason in them.

"Who assaulted you?" asked the detective.

The victim stared at the questioner, but no sound issued from his lips. It was plain that he had not understood what had been said to him.

The detective had in his pocket a flask of spirits kept for emergencies. Some of the contents was forced down the dying man's throat. He gasped, his eyes opened wider, and for a moment it seemed as if he would speak But no words came.

Nick was sorely disappointed. If the man would speak much might be learned. Why was he here? What relation, if any, did he bear to the villainous pair who had in their power the Honolulu millionaire, Fabius Winton? And where had the villains gone?

Moments were precious, and Nick, his forehead contracted in a frown of impatience mingled with chagrin, resolved to try a power which he possessed, but which had been but seldom used.

He fixed his eyes on those of the prostrate man and in a gaze that was meant to penetrate to the subject's very soul.

The attention of the dying man was caught, held by the detective's pentrating glance.

The man's mental chaos was dissipated, and for the time order and reason resumed sway over his intelligence. With his compelling eyes still glued fast to the eyes of his subject Nick again asked: "Who assaulted you?"

The answer almost took away the detective's breath.

"Win—Winton." Clearly, though faintly, the name was spoken.

"Winton?" exclaimed Nick. "Are you not mistaken?"

"No—I" the voice ceased, there was a convulsive movement of the man's frame and in a moment he was dead.

The great detective gazed long and thoughtfully at the dead face. A mystery pervaded the affair, and, try as he would, he could not, with the meager facts at his command, arrive at any plausible solution of it.

The more he considered it the more strange the case became. Fabius Winton, wealthy and reputable, had been lured to this vacant building by the most dangerous pair of criminals in America, for it was unreasonable to suppose that the respectable millionaire had had any shady transactions with Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters. And in the building had been found the man who now lay dead upon the floor. He had been killed, and everything pointed to a most brutal murder. There might be reason for the man's murder at the hands of Duke Jayne. The murdered man might have been an accomplice who had made demands which Jayne had refused to grant and high words might have led to the murder. Or, as an accomplice or partner, he might have been in the way and therefore his death had been resolved upon. But to accept the dying man's words that Fabius Winton had inflicted the fatal wound opened a line of conjecture that Nick would fain have discarded as improbable.

The detective paced the floor with clouded brow. He knew as a rule that dying men tell the truth, but it was within his experience that there were some notable exceptions. Perhaps the dying man had meant to tell the truth, but had been the victim of a deception; or else he had, for some reason, yet to be explained, deliberately fastened the crime upon an innocent man.

It was half-an-hour before the policeman returned, accompanied by the chief of police and two detectives. Prior to their arrival Nick investigated every portion of the basement. In the third room nothing was found. The only room which contained any furnishings or any articles was the room where the murder had been committed. Besides the various implements of crime there was a small cot with bedding, and on one of the shelves a chip basket partly filled with articles of food.

From the collection of hatchets, knives, saws, and rubber gloves, the detective believed that the tools had been procured for the purpose of dissection. They spoke of murder and the concealment of the bodies of the victims.

One discovery which might assist in the unraveling of the mystery was made just before the local officers came into the room.

A careful inspection of the dead face and the finding of the dead man's hat established his identity with one of the passengers on the island steamer which had struck the rocks near Fort Point.

Nick had not observed the man closely, but he had marked his nervousness and had overheard the words which fell from his lips when the accident occurred. The man had asserted that the accident had lost to him the opportunity of a lifetime. What was the opportunity, and by what strange fate had he been led to this house to meet a frightful death?

Speculation for the present would be useless. Nick saw hard work ahead, work for the brain as well as the body, and he had no intention of evading the responsibility that had been thrust upon him.

The detective went with the officials to the morgue, where the clothing was searched.

There was not in any of the pockets a scrap of paper or a piece of money. There were no rings on his fingers, and about his person no watch, purse, or pocketbook. He had been robbed as well as murdered, and means had been taken to cover up his identity.

Later, in the chief's office, Nick said: "I shall soon find out the man's name and business. The murderers never counted on my presence at the house nor suspected that I was a passenger on the steamer with their victim. We can go over the passenger list, and by a process of careful elimination, assisted by the knowledge which your office and the steamer's officers will be able to give, we ought to put our fingers on his name. Other information may be obtained in this city. If we shall fail to get it, a cablegram to Honolulu will probably give us what we desire."

The chief extended his cigar-case. When the weeds had been lighted he said: "From the evidence before us we must conclude that Winton passed the night in the vacant house and that the murder was committed this morning."

Nick inclined his head.

"But morning may mean just before daybreak. In this case it probably does. Singular, isn't it, that the black deed should have been done at so early an hour."

"Yes," said Nick, as he puffed slowly at his cigar. "And yet," he continued after a pause, "we may easily strike a theory which will fit the case."

The chief was now all attention. "Propound," he said.

"Whoever killed this stranger, Dinan, may have desired darkness for the bloody work in order that an escape from the house might be effected before daylight. That the three, Winton, Jayne, and the woman left the building under cover of the dark seems beyond question, for we have not found any one who saw either of them go away from the place to-day."

"It seems inconceivable that a millionaire should have been the confederate of criminals of the stripe of Duke

Jayne and Cleo Masters, Nick, but all the acts and circumstances point that way."

"They can be made to point that way," said Nick slowly, "by one who is trying to form a theory and is looking for something to support it. I do not think Fabius Winton is, or was, for he may be dead, a criminal. My talk with his daughter has given me a different opinion. He may be or may have been weak, but I do not believe that any crime lies at his door."

"Your idea is, then, that Winton has been spirited away for the purpose of blackmail."

"Yes."

"I am afraid the facts are against such a theory," remarked the chief, with a quiet smile, "for you must admit that Winton, if he stayed in the vacant house last night, must have left it willingly this morning."

"I can account for that proceeding," replied the detective calmly. "The two conspirators, having selected the Honolulan as a victim, lured him to the vacant house. It was not their intention to confine him there until he should be ready to comply with their wishes, but only to hold him for the night. The real place of detention is probably outside the city. The journey would not be a safe one, and besides, there was not time in which to take the millionaire directly to the place of confinement. The vacant house was a convenient halting-spot."

"If you are right, Nick, in your theory of the plot, then Jayne and the woman must have cooked up an exceedingly plausible story to induce Winton to stay all night in the house and then go on with them in the morning."

"Of course; and if you know anything of the character and methods of this pair of operators you must acknowledge that the task would be easy for them to perform."

The chief nodded his head. "Yes," said he, "as wool-pullers they are the limit." He regarded the floor soberly.

"Theories aside," he went on with a snap in his voice and a hard glint in his eyes, "we must get at the truth. We must find Winton and we must catch these two devils in human form. It's your case, Nick, and to you I am quite willing to play second fiddle. Go ahead, and remember that the entire police force of San Francisco is back of you."

Nick thanked the speaker and they then proceeded to make the investigations, having as an object the discovery of the name, residence, occupation, and reputation of the murdered man.

Before night fell they had learned all that the steamship officials, the police bureau of information, and the Hawaiian police were able to furnish them.

The dead man had given his name as Peter Frisk when he paid his passage-money and secured his berth on the steamer bound for Honolulu. All reports indicated that he was a stranger in San Francisco. He had stayed one night at a second-class hotel and had stated to the proprietor that he had just arrived in the city and had never been there before. He was on his way to the Sandwich Islands, where he expected to make his fortune.

No one had called on him at the hotel, but after registering and looking at his room he had gone out, and was absent several hours.

Nick Carter listened to the various reports and then asked this question: "Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters were here last year, weren't they?"

"Yes, but only for a short time. They behaved themselves, seemed to have plenty of money, and as no warrants were then out against them I let them alone."

"Where did they come from?"

"Australia."

Nick's remark surprised the chief.

"Things are coming our way," he said. "Peter Frisk is an Australian."

"How do you make that out? The information we have received doesn't show it. You must have had a private tip."

"I have used my eyes and ears, that's all," Nick responded.

The chief's curiosity was now keenly aroused. The detective hastened to gratify it.

"I have held back what I know," he said, "in hopes that an investigation would both confirm and supplement that knowledge. When the steamer struck the rocks Peter Frisk—it may not be his true name, but we must call him by it—spoke several words. He had a peculiar accent. It was English and it was not English. But I spotted it. It was Australian. Now you know, chief, for you have met all sorts and conditions of men in your experience of life, that the Australian speaks English with a very peculiar accent. He has a twang of the bush which to the ear of the expert differentiates his speech from that of the Englishman, pure and simple."

"That's so, Nick," admitted the chief, with a look of appreciation. "And this means an inquiry in a new direction."

"Precisely. If Frisk told the truth and had arrived in the city the day before the departure of the steamer, then a call at the Australian steamship offices may give some valuable points upon which to work. I'll attend to that detail."

After some further conversation the detective left the chief's office.

It was now evening and close upon the hour fixed for his report to Florence Garth at the Palace Hotel.

After a hasty dinner at a restaurant Nick went to the hotel and sent up his card.

"I don't think she is in," said the boy who took the card. "She went out awhile ago and I haven't seen her come back."

The detective was both surprised and alarmed. A dark thought crept into his mind.

"Did you see her face as she went out?" he asked the boy.

"I stood right in front of her and I reckon she would have run over me if I hadn't side-stepped out of her way."

"Her mind was preoccupied, of course."

"It was sure 'pre' something, all right. She was excited, but she wasn't scared."

"What was the expression, then?"

"Well," answered the boy, "she had a fighting look on. Her lips were shut tight and there was something in her eyes that said, 'Clear the track, for I'm a-coming.'"

Nick thought a moment. Then he said: "Might she not have had a caller this afternoon without your knowing it?"

"Sure. A person might not want to send up a card. Particular friend, for instance."

Nick walked away.

Inquiries on the sidewalk, among the cab-drivers and hackmen, elicited the information that the young woman had gone away on foot.

The detective spent an hour in phoning the various cab and hack stands and offices and auto-stations and garages, but without result.

Next he notified all the police-stations, and then sat down in the grand court of the hotel and waited without hope.

Ten o'clock came and Miss Garth had not returned.

At eleven o'clock Nick gave up his vigil. If there had not been foul play, he concluded, she would have returned before this.

His own quarters were north of Market Street, in a private house. To reach his temporary abode he had to go up Geary Street for a few blocks.

This locality brought him outside of the business section.

Within a block of the corner which he must turn to go in the direction of his lodgings he saw a man come out of the vestibule of a private residence, stop on the sidewalk at the foot of the steps, and light a cigar. There was nothing unusual about such a proceeding, but something that followed gave sensational character to the scene.

While the man was holding the match to the end of his cigar, another man, who had been concealed behind a tree, suddenly sprang forward and threw himself on the smoker.

There ensued a fierce struggle and while it was progressing Nick Carter intervened. Reaching the fiercely squirming forms on the sidewalk, he met with one of the great surprises of his life.

CHAPTER III.

ONE SURPRISE FOLLOWS ANOTHER.

At the moment of the detective's arrival the man who had been assaulted obtained the mastery over the assailant. Astride of the suppositious footpad, he grasped that individual by the throat and lifting the head from the pavement let it fall again with a thud that came within an ace of crushing the man's skull.

This effective operation accomplished, the man raised his head, saw Nick, and quickly exclaiming: "Here, sit on this rascal till I fetch a policeman," rose to his feet and hurried away.

Nick's one glance showed him a well-dressed, powerfully built fellow, with sharp eyes, and a heavy brown beard, which concealed the greater part of his face.

As he stood looking at the man's retreating form, his forehead wrinkled in puzzled thought, the man on the sidewalk uttered a deep groan. The face was in the shadow cast by the tree behind which he had shortly before been hidden, but as the detective bent over him some words were uttered that caused Nick to start back in amazement.

"Got me, did you? Got me, when I might have had the drop. What will Nick say?"

The voice was familiar, for it was the voice of Patsy, Nick Carter's shrewd and courageous assistant.

The detective could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes and ears.

He had supposed Patsy to be in New York. And yet here he was in San Francisco at a most peculiar time and the victim of a most peculiar adventure.

Instantly the disappearance of the man whom Patsy had assaulted became invested with dark significance.

Lifting the young man-hunter's head, Nick poured some brandy down his throat. The effect was immediate. Patsy's eyes opened fully and he made an effort to arise.

"You are all right," said Nick, and then before Patsy could give oral expression to his astonishment at meeting his chief at that time and in that place, he went on: "Who was the fellow you sailed into?"

"Duke Jayne."

Nick jumped to his feet. "Confound the luck!" he ejaculated in strong disgust. "I had him in my power and did not know it. Patsy, go to my rooms"—giving street and number—"and wait for me."

Without another word he was off.

The young detective, not in the best of humor, went to Nick's quarters, but it was close upon daylight before the great detective showed himself.

"A night of defeat," he said crossly, as he entered and faced Patsy. "Duke Jayne had too good a start. I failed to trace him. If I had even seen the rascal before I might not have been fooled by his disguise. But he has never operated in New York and this is the first time I have been called upon to take his trail."

"I was dead on to Mr. Man and I acted like a farmer!" said Patsy, in disgust.

"I got excited and took too many chances." He paused and then, as a sudden thought came to him, he added: "But it may come out all right, after all."

"What do you mean?" Nick asked as he scrutinized his assistant's face, now alight with hope.

"Chick may land him."

"Chick? Is he in San Francisco, too?" Nick in the eagerness of joy grasped Patsy by the hands.

"Sure. I parted with him but a short time before I butted in on Duke Jayne. We were working the snap together."

Nick Carter gripped Patsy's hands until the bones were about to crack.

Then he sat down and said: "Tell your story. I am dying to hear what has brought you and Chick to this city."

"A desire to be of service to you in your hunt for Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters, Nick. You left us in New York without instructions, because you believed that your precious pair had gone to the Sandwich Islands. Two days after you left, and when we supposed it was too late to reach you by wire, Chick, out for an airing near Riverside Park, was the witness of an automobile accident. A wheel dropped; there came a slewing round and an overturn which caught a man just beyond the sidewalk and gave the coroner a job an hour afterward.

"The victim was Lumpy Beale, the 'gun' who was suspected of having had a hand in the abduction of Jimmy Fraser, the son of the Long Island millionaire. Chick was the first to reach him after the accident. He was conscious and recognized Chick. 'I'm done for,' he said, 'and it's the bone-yard instead of San Francisco and a stack of golden bucks. What will you produce for a pointer?' he added. 'It's about Nick and Duke Jayne.'"

"Chick caught his breath. But he had an answer ready. 'I will see that you are decently buried,' he replied.

"'That suits,' said Lumpy. But there was no opportunity then to talk. Chick went to the hospital with the patrol and there his chance came.

"Beale had but a short time to live and it cost him a great effort to speak. But he opened up sufficiently for Chick's purposes. He said that he had come to New York from Chicago at the behest of Jayne and for the purpose of ascertaining whether or not Nick Carter had gone to San Francisco. The errand had been accomplished and he had made arrangements to leave New York that evening and rejoin Jayne in this city.

"Chick was surprised, for he knew that you thought that Jayne was on his way to Honolulu. Beale shook his head when Chick expressed a doubt as to Jayne's presence in San Francisco. 'He never intended to go,' was the dying gun's positive assertion. 'He gave it out that he was going, but that was a blind. There is a fine field for work on the coast and Jayne will stay there as long as it is healthy for him to do so.'

"Chick asked Beale if he knew Jayne's San Francisco address and received an affirmative reply. Chick got the address and some other information, and that evening we were on the train bound for the Pacific metropolis. We hit the town last night, and after selecting a roosting-place started out to round up Jayne and his equally dangerous partner, Cleo Masters. While I waited around a corner, Chick went to the house which Lumpy Beale had given as the address."

"Somewhat risky, wasn't it? Jayne would naturally suspect the intentions of a stranger coming as Chick did."

"Coming as Chick did?" repeated Patsy with a queer smile. "I don't think you have got wise to the way Chick came."

Nick thought a moment. "I am pretty good at guessing," he said, "and therefore I'll take back what I said about the risk. Chick came as Lumpy Beale."

"That's what he did, Nick, and you never saw a neater disguise. It's a winner for a million bucks. Beale saw Jayne but twice in his life, the New York gun having been sent to Jayne on the recommendation of Clancy Walker, the English fence. Jayne doesn't know that Beale has croaked, for the chief and the coroner of New York stood for the unknown dope at the inquest. Chick fixed that all right."

"Well, did Chick find Jayne?"

"No, the piker was out. 'Then I'll camp here till he comes back,' says Chick to the landlady. He says it loud enough for me to hear. I takes the cue and was about to hike along when I lamps a man coming out of an alley. The building Chick had gone into corners on this alley and the man comes to the front steps, stops, looks toward the door a minute and then turns and moves on.

"He was in his glad rags, but he was a big, husky brute and I at once made up my mind that he was Duke Jayne. It wasn't altogether the build and the get-up which put me wise," Patsy added quickly, as he noted Nick's look of surprise.

"A pointer Chick got from Lumpy Beale did the business. Duke Jayne has a habit of cocking his head when he is eying any person or anything. He handed out this dope twice while he stood in front of the building. I explained his hesitation at the door-steps in this way: He has been down the alley and is on his way to attend to some other business.

"Passing his lodging-place, for a moment he is in two minds about going back to his room for a spell. He concludes that is not worth while to reenter the building. This decision, thinks I, is bad for Chick, but I may make it good for me. So I does the shadow act. He meanders to that crib on Geary Street and talks for a few minutes with a dumpy dame who comes to the door.

"From the words I caught while I was behind the tree on the edge of the sidewalk, I made out that he was inquiring about rooms. Had an idea of changing his quarters, I think. When he descended the steps I made that amateur break of mine."

Patsy paused and hung his head.

Nick shook his head gently. But he was smiling.

"I don't know what was eating me," the young detective went on. "Perhaps I wanted to swell my record," he said, as he drew the corners of his mouth together and looked at Nick with a twinkle in his eye, "and perhaps I wanted to hand out a big surprise to Chick. If I did act with these motives I have been punished. Instead of making Chick look like thirty cents I have made myself resemble the booze blush on the copper cent of a hobo."

"Didn't the fellow's size appeal to your sense of caution?"

"Not for the millionth part of a minute. At the moment I felt able to tackle a mountain. But that gazabo is a lightning striker, all right. He's got the strength and he's got the science. I am no puling infant myself, but I ducks my block to Duke Jayne. I should like to see you tackle him, Nick."

"I may have to, Patsy."

"If you do, it will be a sight worth seeing. By the way," he added, "I have forgotten something. I picked up this on the sidewalk where the scrap took place. Must have been dropped by Jayne."

Patsy handed Nick a stone watch-charm. It was oval and in two parts. One was jasper, the other jade.

Nick pressed a spring and the locket opened. A little object dropped to the floor. The detective took it up and looked at it with a curious smile. It was the bronze representation of a tailless dragon. Replacing it in the locket, he snapped the spring and put the locket in his pocket.

"What do you make of it?" asked Patsy.

"It was made in China," replied Nick. "It may have great significance and it may mean nothing. I am too sleepy to talk about it now."

At nine o'clock the two detectives were out of bed. Bath and breakfast occupied the time up to eleven. Then, in disguise, Nick as a day laborer and Patsy as a young Chinese, they set out to find Chick.

First they went to the lodging-house where Chick and Patsy had engaged rooms upon their arrival in San Francisco. Chick was not there, nor had his bed been occupied during the night.

The police headquarters was called up. No report there had been made. Neither the chief nor any of the force had seen Chick. The fact that he was in the city was a surprise to them.

Before setting out for the house which Chick had entered the evening before, Nick phoned the Palace Hotel and received the information that Miss Garth was still absent.

A few blocks from the house given as Duke Jayne's address, the detectives parted, with a perfect understanding of what each was to do.

The house was on Sacramento Street, on the hill, and near the Chinese section. The alley Patsy had spoken of passed through a portion of Chinatown.

Nick, in the guise of a laborer, had on a shabby suit of clothes and his face wore a half-starved expression. He had been careful about the make-up and knew that he looked like an honest man out of work and not like the usual whisky-sodden hobo.

He dragged his feet painfully up the steps of the building he wished to investigate and timidly touched the electric button in the door-frame.

A woman appeared in response to the bell. She was tall, finely formed, with the face that suggested her age as fifty. The hair was gray, and though the cheeks were full there were lines about her mouth and unmistakable signs of crow's-feet under and on the sides of the eyes.

The detective looked at her shamefacedly and began his story.

"I am a poor man," he said, "and I need work badly. I have just come out of the hospital to find my wife sick and my two children, both under six, nearly starved. I am willing to do anything. I don't want plain charity. I want to earn my money."

The woman gazed at the false laborer with pitying eyes. But when she spoke Nick had hard work to control his amazement.

For the voice was that of Florence Garth.

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S COURAGEOUS RESOLVE.

The great detective had been greatly puzzled when in the basement of the vacant house near Laguna Street, where he had heard Peter Frisk lay the awful crime of murder upon the shoulders of Fabius Winton. Now, in the face of this new sensation, his first feeling was one of amazement. Florence Garth, gentle, high bred, confiding, and honest, in the house of crime and apparently at home. For a moment, his thoughts were confused. Could it be that he had been deceived? That all his deductions, founded on vast experience and a long, close study of human nature, had been wrong? That all signs, in this instance, had failed? He could not believe it. And soon he was less inclined to doubt his former judgment when upon another look into the eyes of the disguised young woman he caught not the slightest hint of evil.

But the situation was a strange one and he was anxious for an explanation.

"I will see what I can do for you." she had said. "Will you step inside for a few moments?"

This was not the way such applicants for work were ordinarily treated. But Nick had ceased to wonder. His wits were at work and he was beginning to understand what at first had so greatly puzzled him.

"Thank you," he said humbly, and followed her into the reception-room.

The detective sat down in a chair. The woman stood in front of him for a moment, her head bowed and her hand at her brow. Then she seated herself near the door and said: "I am alone to-day. There are only two lodgers and they are away temporarily."

Nick made no reply to this announcement made to a stranger. "I have said this," she went on, "for I believe I may trust you. I am in need of the services of an honest man. I have undertaken a task which may be too great for my strength. If you had not come I should, I think, have sent for a friend of mine. Yes, he is a friend of mine," she added, half to herself, "although I have known him but a day. His name is Carter, Nicholas Carter," she continued, now looking squarely at the disguised detective. "You must have heard of him."

Now was the chance for a dramatic play. Nick had but to arise, throw off his disguise, say, "I am the man," and a scene quite to the taste of a lover of sensation would have been created.

But he was not yet ready to unmask. The young woman was an interesting subject. He wanted to study her further. As the landlady of this house she was playing a part, and Nick desired to discover if possible why she was in this quarter of the town under such peculiar circumstances.

Therefore he said: "I have heard of Mr. Carter. I think he will serve you honestly."

"And ably, you should have added," she returned with positiveness. "But you will have to take his place for awhile. I might have some difficulty in finding him, you see."

"What is it that you wish me to do?" inquired Nick.

"To remain here in concealment until the arrival of one of my lodgers."

"A man?"

"Yes. It is now noon. He should be here before two o'clock."

"And what must I do when he arrives?"

"If he comes alone you are to arrest him."

"That is the duty of an officer, isn't it?"

The disguised young woman frowned. "Any citizen has the right to arrest a criminal," she said coldly. "If you do not care to undertake the work I can telephone to the police office for a man."

"You may count on me," said Nick quickly. "I am willing, nay anxious to serve you."

"I am glad of that," was the reply given in a tone of intense relief, "for I wish to avoid publicity, if such a thing be possible."

"If this criminal should not come alone, what then?"

"If he should come with a male companion, you are to do nothing until I call for you. Then you are to come from your place of hiding, which, by the way, will be in that closet under the stairs, and hasten to the living-room, which adjoins this one with the door there"—pointing. "On entering the living-room you will know what to do."

"One question," said Nick. "Does the appearance of the criminal with another man mean that the criminal is to go free?"

"Yes."

The disguised detective looked at the false landlad steadily for a moment. His voice was grave as he said: "You, yourself, are an honest woman." She bowed and her cheeks flushed. "Do you find moral justification for such a course?"

"Yes," was the firm answer.

"All your actions are controlled by the desire to benefit some one else, is that not so?"

Florence Garth regarded the speaker in dumb surprise. Soon an expression of fear crept into her face. "Explain your words," she said faintly.

Nick Carter smiled inwardly. When he spoke, his voice, disguised though it was, had a ring in it that affected the listener strangely.

"My explanation will doubtless surprise you," he began. "I know the name of your lodger and I know what the police think of him. I know that you, a woman refinement, of honesty, and of courage, are here under false pretenses. You have an uncle, who is in some terrible danger. He is in the hands of this criminal who has rooms in this house.

"How you found out that he resided here I do not know. But in some way you did discover his hiding-place, and believing that you would find your uncle here, also, you came in disguise. You deceived the villain who has your uncle in his power. To have done so shows you are an exceptionally clever woman.

"But you must have failed on some essential point or you would not have consented to purchase your uncle's freedom at the expense of justice. I believe I have found the cue to your conduct. Your disguise was not sufficient, or in some unguarded moment you betrayed yourself. The result is that you promised to pay the ransom demanded for your uncle's restoration to liberty and also to take no steps to prosecute the blackmailer. Am I not right?"

Florence Garth, who had heard this speech with wide-eyed wonderment, was about to speak, when Nick continued:

"You need not answer now. You must first hear my report. You will remember when I left you yesterday I promised to report the result of my investigations. The hour was fixed for nine o'clock. I was on time at the Palace but you had gone, disappeared."

The disguised heiress' countenance took on all sorts of colors while Nick was speaking. She was laughing and crying when the last word was uttered. "Mr. Carter! Mr. Carter!" she exclaimed, as soon as she could control herself. "I never for a moment thought it was you. How clever you are."

Nick ignored this outburst. He looked at his watch. More than half-an-hour had passed. Jayne was due in about an hour.

"We have time for a thorough understanding," he said. "I will make my belated report and then hear what you have to say."

His story was listened to with absorbing interest. Miss Garth's face paled when the accusation of Peter Frisk was stated, but she quickly regained her wonted color. When the tale was finished she made this comment: "The man who was killed in that basement lied. My uncle is a man of exemplary character. His principles are of the highest, and his life is an open book. A better man never lived. I ought to know him," she concluded proudly.

"I agree with you that he is no murderer," replied Nick frankly. "But there is a mystery about the accusation and I shall try to unravel it. About this dead man, Frisk. Did you ever hear the name?"

"Yes. A man of that nature called at the hotel the day before the departure of the steamer. He came to see uncle."

"Did he see him?"

"No. My uncle was not in and the man left a sealed note. I delivered it to Mr. Winton when he returned."

"Did your uncle read the note in your presence?"

"No."

"And did he ever make any reference to it?"

"He said it concerned a matter of business. I asked no questions, though I noticed that uncle was slightly disturbed when he spoke of the note. I supposed he was disappointed over his failure to meet the man at the hotel."

"You wish now that you had been inquisitive, don't you?"

"Yes, for I believe that this Peter Frisk was the cause of the disappearance of my uncle."

"If you are right Frisk must have been a confederate of Duke Jayne."

"Of course. Isn't that your opinion?"

"Yes. But time is flying. Later I will give you the benefit of certain deductions I have made. I haven't heard your story. Pardon me, if I ask you to be as succinct as possible, omitting, however, nothing that is relevant to the affair."

Miss Garth inclined her head in perfect understanding and then began: "When you left me yesterday, Mr. Carter, I fully intended to remain in my apartments until your return. It was altogether owing to a lucky discovery that I changed the program. Some time after you had gone—it might have been an hour—I heard the sound of violent sobbing in an adjoining room. Soon the words, 'Oh, God, what shall I do?' uttered in a tone of poignant anguish, reached my ears. There was one of my own sex in dire distress. That she was alone was evident, for I heard no other voice. What I did, any woman of sensibility would have done. I went to the door of her room, tried the knob, found the door was not locked, and entered without knocking.

"On the couch, fully dressed, with her face buried in the pillow, was a gray-haired woman. I touched her on the arm and she rose up with a look of alarm. I spoke soothingly and soon she responded. I will not dwell on what took place during the first quarter of an hour. Suffice to say that she was in need of comfort and advice. She told a story that amazed and frightened me. For years she had been the associate of thieves. She had just arrived from Chicago and had agreed to go that afternoon to this house to take the place of a woman who had become dangerously ill and been removed to a hospital.

"Strange to relate, she did not want to go. All her views of life had undergone a change. It was now her desire to lead an honest existence. The evening before she had attended a religious meeting in a place that had formerly been a theater. She had gone there not knowing of the change, and had remained at first out of curiosity and afterward because she had not the will to depart. The speaker of the evening was a man of great personal magnetism and his burning words affected her as she had never been affected before. She left the meeting-place in tears and passed the most wretched night of her wretched existence. 'I am converted,' she almost shouted in my ears, 'and I want nothing more to do with Duke Jayne and his villainous schemes.'

"I asked her who Duke Jayne was, and she said he was the devil in human shape. She had never seen him, but she knew all about him; for her brother had been his accomplice. Her brother was in prison and Jayne had wired her ten days ago to come to San Francisco and take the place of a woman who had not long to live. Jayne had been informed of her arrival in the city and had sent a note requesting her to come to this house on the afternoon on which I found her.

"Now to explain clearly why I am here, Mr. Carter. After some pertinent interrogations, the woman stated that Jayne in his note had said that he had a rich Honolulan on the hooks and that there was some fine work cut out for her. Instantly I associated the Honolulan with my uncle. Asked if Jayne had a woman confederate, she answered, ‘Yes, Cleo Masters, the most beautiful, daring, and unscrupulous decoy in America.’ Now I was positive that I had discovered the secret of my uncle’s disappearance. He had been lured away for the purpose of blackmail.

“My decision was at once made. I would take the place of the woman who wanted to forsake her life of evil. I am something of an actress. I have appeared at many amateur entertainments, the last in San Francisco a fortnight before I took passage on the steamer. I know a costumer and make-up artist on Market Street and to her I went, after I had satisfactorily supplemented the work of the revivalist by giving the repentant woman money and obtaining her promise to return to Chicago by the next train.

“When I arrived here Duke Jayne was at home and I was received without suspicion. My instructions were quickly given. Ostensibly I was to be the landlady of the house. In reality I was to assist him in his nefarious schemes. He said Cleo Masters was at what he called a ‘sure-thing crib’ in the hills just out of the city and might not come to this house until after the affair of the rich Honolulan, Fabius Winton, had been disposed of. I asked him what his intentions were, and he answered that Winton would have to come up or go the way of other non-producers.

“This statement alarmed me, but I took heart when he added that he was going to give the old fool two more days. If at the end of that time he was still defiant the ax would fall.

“As you must imagine, Mr. Carter, I slept little that night. Shortly before the time for retiring, Jayne being absent, the electric bell rang. I went to the door and found a disreputable-looking young man outside who asked in a wheezy voice if Mr. Jayne was in. ‘If he is, I’ve got to see him,’ he said in a most impudent manner, ‘for I’se de mark he’s lookin’ for, see?’ I made no reply, but just looked at him. As the landlady, it was my business to exercise the greatest caution. That is, for that night, for in the morning it was my intention, watching my chance when Duke Jayne was not in the house, to send word to you at the Palace and also notify the police office. ‘The repulsive fellow at the door’—Nick smiled at this picture of stalwart, good-looking, honest-eyed Chick—‘soon established his right to enter. He showed what he called his ‘credenches.’ They consisted of letters and prison records. The bearer, Lumpy Beale, was recommended as a ‘gun’ who was the son of a gun.” Miss Garth smiled faintly and there was a short pause.

“You admitted him, then?” questioned Nick.

“Yes. I did not like the situation, but I made myself believe that I had no cause for fear. The man was undoubtedly what he represented himself to be and was therefore bound to respect the landlady of his prospective employer’s house.”

Nick indulged in a soft chuckle. Then he said with a straight face: “But if you had met Mr. Lumpy Beale on the street on a dark night when you were alone, your spirits would have sunk to zero, eh?”

“Yes. If there was ever a murderous-looking rascal, he was one.”

Nick, a past master in self-control, had all he could do to suppress a desire to laugh.

“I conducted the fellow to a room. He said he would wait for Jayne’s coming. I was in bed when the master of the house arrived. For half-an-hour the two men conversed in low voices and then all was silent. In the morning they had breakfast together in the house. I went to a restaurant near-by and had the things brought here. It was after breakfast and while this Beale was in his room that Duke Jayne discovered the cheat I had practised upon him.”

CHAPTER V.

THE COILS OF VILLAINY.

Florence Garth had been speaking rapidly so as to bring her story within the time likely to be free from interruption. She now said: “I will not go into details. We must take no chances. Duke Jayne knew I was disguised when, without ceremony, he entered my private apartment and found me rearranging my false hair. I was so startled and confused when he denounced me as a fraud that I let him know who I was. Instead of being frightened, he laughed and said he had wanted a card to make his hand invincible and I had furnished it.

“I did not ask an explanation, but at once implored him to release my uncle, promising to pay whatever sum he demanded as a ransom. He instantly agreed to this, saying it was the money he was after and that he did not care where it came from. But he insisted on this proviso: I must swear not to prosecute him for the kidnaping. I took the oath and he left, promising to return with my uncle before two hours had elapsed.”

“Did this Lumpy Beale go with him?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now as to that oath you took. You expect me to honor it, do you not?”

“Of course.”

“As it applies only to the kidnaping of Fabius Winton. But the oath does not cover murder nor other cases of kidnaping.”

Florence Garth compressed her lips. For a moment a fierce light shone in her eyes.

"I am glad a way has been found to punish this villain," she said.

"Your desire for police assistance shows that you did not entirely trust Jayne's word," remarked Nick.

"You are right. I wanted to strengthen my defenses. If he did keep his promise I intended to tell the police, should they be here, that I had made a mistake and had no complaint to make."

"Had such a program been carried out Jayne would have been arrested in spite of your protestations. You did not then know of the murder in the basement nor of the suspicion entertained by the police that Jayne is either the murderer or an accomplice."

"No, I was ignorant of all that."

A noise from without was heard. Some persons were ascending the steps. Nick arose quickly and noiselessly entered the closet. Florence Garth with pale face and beating heart left the reception-room and hastened to her private apartment.

There was no ring of the bell. A pass-key opened the door and two men stepped inside. One was Duke Jayne, the other a handsome, graceful, dark-complexioned young man, wearing a delicate silken mustache. Jayne passed without stopping into the living-room. His companion stood still for a moment, gazing at the wall above the closet. Then with an evil expression he went out of the room.

The master villain was alone in the living-room when the young man entered. The latter with his finger to his lips stepped to a large oil-painting on the wall near the door, placed his hand in a long, narrow recess which the picture had covered, and raised with considerable difficulty a stout wooden handle or lever.

A grinding noise, followed by a muffled thud, rewarded his effort. Replacing the lever he readjusted the painting and turned a malevolently smiling countenance on Duke Jayne.

At that moment Florence Garth appeared. She had heard the noise and her gravest fears were aroused. On seeing Jayne and the young man, who was a stranger to her, she called with all the strength of her lungs: "Help! help!"

This was the signal that should have brought Nick Carter on the scene. But the great detective did not appear.

Before another cry could be uttered a hand was over her mouth and she was held in a pair of strong arms.

Her assailant was Duke Jayne, but his companion furnished the cords and gag which speedily reduced the unfortunate young woman to utter submission.

"That's one for you, Cleo," said Jayne, as he arose to his feet. "It was my business to be on the lookout, but I was caught napping for once in my life. I'd have bet my soul this innocent piece of goods wouldn't have given us the double cross."

Cleo Masters, disguised as the young man, lifted her eyebrows slightly. "I have always thought you needed a guardian, Duke and it's lucky for you that you have one in me."

"You are a corker, all right," was the appreciative reply. "Together we make a team that's a world beater. We have had good times together, but better ones are coming. Wait till we strike South America."

The woman's black eyes sparkled. "You were in earnest, then, when you said this should be our last job in America?"

"I was giving you straight goods. We have worked Uncle Samuel's country to the limit. The clean-up in this Winton job ought to put us on Easy Street. Who would have thought that this girl would have butted in so as to give us a double play for the gold?"

"Everything appears to be coming our way," soberly admitted Cleo Masters, "but I'll never breathe freely until we land in Callao. I hope you will not fail to wind up the business to-day."

Duke Jayne laughed lightly. After playfully shaking his head at his companion, he said: "You need some thing for your nerves. Take a stiff hooker of booze. There is some in the house, I think."

The woman frowned. "If it weren't for my nerves," she snapped, "you would have been a dead one before this. Have you forgotten that there was a man in this house when we came in?"

"It is quite sufficient that I remember only that there is a man in a trap."

"Idiot!" she retorted in a rage. "I was not thinking of the man. His career of spying is ended, but others outside may know what he knows. The house may be surrounded at this moment."

Jayne sprang to his feet. His look of alarm caused Cleo Masters to smile. "You have come to your senses, I see," she said.

The man made no answer. He went to the front door, softly opened it, and looked out. Seeing nothing to disquiet him he stepped to the sidewalk and cast his eyes up and down the street. Everything, he thought, appeared as it should be.

He remained outside for five minutes. Reentering the house he said: "The man you sent below may have been a burglar. Miss Garth may not have been aware of his presence in the closet. A dollar to a doughnut that you have been constructing a mountain out a molehill."

"Why did she scream for help when she saw us? We hadn't said a word, hadn't made an offensive move?"

"There is something in what you say, Cleo." He stared gravely at the carpet. Suddenly he lifted his head. "I know how we may know the truth. Miss Florence Garth shall put us wise."

"Perhaps she won't," remarked his companion.

"Won't, eh?" He closed his brutal mouth with a snap. "I'll make her."

Stooping, he removed the gag from the young woman's mouth, saying as he did so, "If you utter a cry, I'll kill you."

Florence Garth gazing up into his evil countenance believed that he would do as he had threatened. But she did not open her lips.

"Who is the man who went into the closet?" he asked roughly.

As she did not give an immediate answer, he went on: "You might as well tell me, for the fellow is as good as dead. You did not know there is a stationary chair in the closet, did you? No more did you know that the chair is on a trap-door which is operated by a lever concealed behind that picture on the wall. Too bad that I didn't tell you about the trap and its workings before I left you this morning, isn't it?" he added with a sneer.

"If the matter had occurred to you, Duke, you would have posted her," put in Cleo Masters half in jest, half in earnest.

"I reckon I would," replied Jayne, with a shake of the head, "I'm losing my grip, I'm afraid."

"Where is my uncle?" demanded Florence Garth, anger struggling with fear. "You promised that he should come back with you."

"Suppose you answer my question before I take up your uncle's case," returned the stalwart villain.

The unfortunate niece of the Honolulu millionaire closed her eyes in troubled thought. If she did not answer, if she did not tell all there was to be told, she might not only be unable to save her uncle, but might lose her own life as well. Duke Jayne and his confederate must now believe that the man who had entered the closet was an enemy to their villainous plans. They had probably condemned him to death, and the sentence would undoubtedly be carried out even if the villains were without clue to the identity of the victim. What harm, therefore, could result if she told the truth? She did not know that Nick Carter had two skilful and fearless assistants at work on the case, for the conversation in the reception-room had been cut short before the great detective had had a chance to explain what were the parts that had been assigned to Chick and Patsy. And with her desire for life came the thought that her willingness to answer the question that had been asked might not only save her life, but be the means of aiding her uncle. Her mind made up, she opened her eyes and said: "I have concluded to speak as you wish."

Duke Jayne threw a triumphant glance in Cleo Masters' direction. "Good," he said. "But I must swear you."

"It is not necessary," Miss Garth replied coldly. "I shall speak the truth. I have nothing to conceal. However, swear me if you insist."

The villain, case hardened, and a stranger to character and refinement, did insist. The oath was taken and then the question was repeated: "Who is the man who went into the closet?"

"He is a detective and his name is Nicholas Carter."

Cleo Masters uttered a cry of terror. Duke Jayne's face turned the color of ashes. An awful fear gripped his heart. For some moments he stood with unseeing eyes at the countenance of his victim.

Suddenly the fog seemed to lift. The situation became clear to him. He burst into a laugh. "Nick Carter, eh?" he said, with a wicked chuckle. "The king-pin of American detectives. And in my power. Cleo, brace up and have some style about you. We have struck something that puts a gold-mine out of business. We have caught Nick Carter. I had rather say those words, knowing that I spoke the truth, than take a million dollars. Gee whiz! Nick Carter!"

He caught his confederate around the waist and began to waltz her up and down the room.

Florence Garth feared that she had made a mistake. She waited anxiously for Jayne to announce his intentions.

The waltzing came to an end. Jayne approached the bound woman. With a sardonic grin, he said: "I suppose Nick knows all about your affairs."

"Yes."

"Did he come here alone?"

She nodded her head.

"Do the police know that I occupy this house?"

"They do not."

"Nicky is playing a lone hand. I see, I see. And he counted on nabbing me, eh? Your cry was the signal for him to make his dramatic entrée, was it not?"

"Yes."

The master villain laughed again. He was in remarkably good humor.

Now Florence Garth took the initiative. "I wish to talk about my uncle," she said.

"Go ahead," was the cheerful reply.

"Why was he not brought here?"

"Because he is ill. Just a weak spell, doesn't amount to anything," he added quickly, as he saw her face pale. "The experiences of the past day have knocked him out, but he'll be all right after he has given his check and seen you."

"Has he agreed to come to your terms?" Miss Garth asked, with an eager, hopeful gaze.

"Yes; that is, he has agreed to sign the check as soon as you are restored to him."

"He knows that I am here, then?"

"Of course. Your coming settled the matter. If you had not come—well, something unpleasant would have happened."

She shuddered and there was both terror and loathing in her eyes.

"When night comes," he proceeded easily, "a hack will take us to the place where your uncle is temporarily sojourning. The business will occupy but a short time. There is the matter of the check and certain necessary obligations to be undertaken—in the proper manner, of course—after which you and your uncle will be at liberty to go to the Sandwich Islands or—the devil for all I care."

Florence Garth ceased to look at the man who held her fate in his hands. Again she shut her eyes. Her mouth twitched as if in pain. She sighed.

"What's the matter?" demanded Jayne roughly. "Doesn't the program suit you? You want your liberty and you want your uncle's. You are going to get both, so what are you beefing about?"

Her eyes opened. "Mr. Carter," she said, "he must go free, too." He scowled and she went on before he could speak. "You want the money. You may fail to get it if you don't accept my terms. I shall not try to have you arrested and punished for what you have already done. Promise that Mr. Carter shall not be further harmed and I will take it upon myself to prevent action against you on his part until you have sailed for South America."

"A fine promise," sneered Cleo Masters. "I'd like to see you hold down Nick Carter once we have turned him loose."

Ignoring the speech and the speaker Florence Garth addressed herself to Jayne. "When does the next ship sail for Callao?" she asked.

"Day after to-morrow."

"Then I can easily do as I have said. Give over to me the custody of Mr. Carter and I will solemnly agree to keep him here in this house until the ship has had twenty-four hours' start."

The villain hesitated, bit his lips, and then looked at his confederate. Cleo Masters nodded her head and one eyelid drooped slightly.

"All right," said Jayne, "I agree to your proposition. We will settle the check matter and then I will take you back to this house with the understanding that Nick Carter is to continue a prisoner until I am far beyond the Golden Gate on my way to Callao."

The electric bell tinkled.

Duke Jayne, after a startled glance at Cleo Masters, stooped, replaced the gag in Florence Garth's mouth, lifted her in his strong arms, and quickly bore her to her room. When he reentered the living-room his confederate was at the front door. He heard her ask, "Who's there?" and he heard the reply, "Lumpy Beale."

His agitation had left him and he was smiling when Chick, disguised as the New York "gun," shambled into the apartment.

CHAPTER VI.

A DEED OF DARKNESS.

Ever since his parting from Patsy, Chick had been operating alone. Patsy had disappeared and Chick was without the knowledge that Nick Carter was in San Francisco. Therefore he had reached the conclusion that the running to earth of the master criminal, Duke Jayne, and his accomplice, must be performed by himself alone. He had the highest opinion of Patsy's courage and ability, but he feared that the young detective had met either with a serious mishap or had struck a false trail, the pursuit of which was consuming valuable time.

But Chick, though alone in the fight, believed that he would be able to pull it off satisfactorily. Everything so far had worked in his favor. He had deceived the astute Jayne and the sharp-eyed Cleo Masters. Accepted without question as Lumpy Beale, he had gone with Jayne to the old house in the hills where Fabius Winton had been lured. There he had found the millionaire a prisoner—chained hand and foot to the floor and half starved.

Chick would have arrested Jayne at the house and then released Winton if he had not foreseen that such a move might have prevented the capture of Cleo Masters. She was, if anything, more dangerous than Jayne. Without her fiendish assistance the villain would have been unable to carry out his plots of blackmail and murder. Chick was desirous of making a clean-up, and when Jayne informed him that the woman would soon arrive at the house in the hills he thought there was nothing wanting to spring the trap and bag his game.

But, though Jayne waited long past the hour agreed upon, she did not come. At last the villain said: "I think I know where she is holding out. I'll look her up, for this business must be finished to-day. You must stay here until I return. And when I return Cleo and Miss Garth will be with me."

Before announcing this determination Jayne had revealed the whole plot which had as its object the blackmailing of the Hawaiian millionaire. And now was Chick vastly astonished to learn that the middle-aged woman who had admitted him to the Sacramento Street house was Florence Garth in disguise. If he had only known this fact while he was in the house, he could have posted her, and his work would have been made comparatively easy. But it would not be hard as it was, he told himself, and so he listened without disquietude to the details of Jayne's villainous scheme.

Fabius Winton had stubbornly refused, up to Jayne's arrival with Chick, to sign the check which should give him his liberty. But when, to his alarm, he was told that his niece was in the villain's power, he weakened and said he would sign the check when Florence should be brought before him.

"And here comes my double play," said Jayne, with a wink that made Chick want to kick him. "The old grig puts his John Henry on the check for twenty thousand and I cuts him loose. 'Come, Florence,' he will say, 'let us leave this place.' But he doesn't leave just then. Not on your hamburger. 'There's another little matter to be settled before you will be permitted to wreck the Palace grill,' I will say. 'You have purchased your freedom, but you haven't done as much for your beloved niece. She is now in the hole. It will cost you another twenty thousand to pull her out.' He'll squirm, perhaps try to raise a rough house, but in the end he'll come to the center."

"Course he'll perduce," assented the disguised detective. "Wouldn' I like to see him try ter do de Ajax turn an' me in de play."

"He won't kick much," rejoined Jayne, "for I've got a card up my sleeve that'll make him go all to pieces in a holy second. There was a killing bee in a basement last night and old Winton—but you wait. I'll give you a surprise, old man, if Winton comes any monkey business."

Jayne soon left the house with the promise that he would return inside of two hours with Cleo Masters and Florence Garth.

If anything out of the way should happen during his absence the pseudo Lumpy Beale was to hasten to the house on Sacramento Street and notify him.

The villain's last words caused Chick to do some serious thinking. His plan to capture Jayne and his accomplice at the house in the hills might not work. The failure of Cleo Masters to keep her appointment troubled him. What if she had received a warning that the police were hot on the track of herself and Jayne? What if Florence Garth had begun some move of her own? If she had, Jayne might not find her at the house when he should arrive there. And again, if he found her, he might walk into a trap. This idea of permitting the police of San Francisco to arrest the murderous blackmailer did not appeal to Chick's sense of propriety. He had ventured so far in the game that he wanted to take all the tricks.

After considering the matter for some time the young detective resolved to change his plan. His first move was to release Winton. The millionaire was surprised beyond measure when he was told that his jailer was not a tool of Duke Jayne, but a detective intent upon Jayne's arrest and punishment.

The cruel experiences he had undergone had left him weak in body, but his spirit had not been crushed. It took all of Chick's powers of persuasion to induce Winton to accept the program which the young detective outlined. But at last the millionaire consented to do as Chick wished.

On his way to the Sacramento Street house Chick's face wore an expression of anxious unrest. He hoped to find Jayne and Cleo Masters in the house, but he told himself that circumstances could easily have conspired to defeat this hope. His joy, therefore, was great when Cleo Masters opened the door and he walked into the living-room to face Duke Jayne.

But while Chick was thrilling with satisfaction Jayne was shaking with fear. "What—what's the matter?" he questioned with trembling lips. "Anything gone wrong?"

"Hades is a-poppin'," answered Chick, his eyes putting on a scared look. "De cops raided de joint an' I got away by de skin of me teet'."

Jayne looked wildly at Cleo Masters. The woman, trying hard to maintain her composure, said to Chick sharply: "Tell your story and be quick about it. If there is danger we must know just where it lies."

The disguised detective threw himself into a chair. After mopping his brow with a handkerchief that once had been white, he said: "How de cops got wise to de game I don't know, but dey did all right, all right. About an hour ago dey swooped down on de joint. I seen 'em comin' an' screws me block. De window was good enough fer Lumpy. Dere was a little bullet play, but me luck was wid me. If de coppers had de guns I had de trees an'—here I was."

"Do you think it possible that you could have been shadowed to this place?" Cleo Masters asked the question.

Chick shook his head. "It's a nickel ag'in a million plunks dat dey didn't," he answered. "Leave Lumpy Beale alone fer trunnin' a cop off de scent. If any of Dinan's mob is onto dis crib dey didn't cop de information from me."

Jayne drew a breath of relief. "We are safe for awhile," he said. He thought a moment and then his face brightened. "We are not entirely bowled out, Cleo. Winton has espaced us, but we have the niece. She shall stand good for the whole forty thousand dollars."

"Do you mean to keep her here?" asked the woman, her tone betraying disgust as well as amazement.

"Why not?" Jayne replied. "This is the safest place I know of."

The woman reflected. "Perhaps you are right after all. But how can you work it? You have got to get word to Winton. Who will take the message?"

"Lumpy here, of course."

Cleo Masters looked at the false Lumpy. His eyes were lowered. He was working out a plan to strike. He had come to the house for the purpose of arresting Jayne and the woman, and the moment to act was near at hand.

As Cleo Masters continued to look at the disguised detective a startling suspicion entered ~~his~~ her mind. Chick, in the rôle of the New York "gun," had told a straight, plausible story. The house in the hills might have been raided, but was it probable that the police had discovered the millionaire's prison? The man who called himself Lumpy Beale had come to the house while Florence Garth was there and hours before the arrival of Duke Jayne. That in itself, now that she could soberly consider it, was suspicious. She determined to put her suspicions to a dramatic test. It had been a cold, windy day and she wore to the house a long raincoat. Leisurely divesting herself of it she laid it across her lap and then said to Jayne: "Your idea is a good one. Let it be carried out. I have only one suggestion to make."

"Spit 'er out," said Jayne indifferently.

"It is that when we leave this house for good and all [illegible] set fire to it."

"Set fire to it? What for?"

"To make ashes of that devil in the basement, Nick Carter."

At the words Chick gave a start that nearly caused his chair to tip over. In his eyes, which sought Cleo Masters' face, there was no sign of the fear that would have been manifested had he been an evil-doer. Instead there was the surprise of the honest man and something more, something that made the woman step toward him.

As she spoke again Chick's brain was in a whirl.

"We caught the smart Nick awhile ago?" she said, "caught him in as neat a trap as was ever invented. He went into a closet of the reception-room and sat in a chair that was over a trap. I sprung the trap by raising a lever you will find behind that oil-painting."

She pointed to the wall, and as Chick turned his head to look the raincoat was thrown quickly over his head and he was jerked forward so that he fell to his knees. The next instant Duke Jayne's powerful arms were in play.

Taken at a disadvantage and opposed to a veritable giant in strength and a vindictive woman who was no mean ally, the brave detective was unable to make successful resistance. The coat which enveloped his head and which had been drawn tightly across his arms so hampered his movements and interfered with his breathing that his subjugation was soon accomplished.

After his arms and legs had been secured the coat was removed.

Cleo Masters went to the kitchen to return presently with a towel and a basin of water.

After she had busied herself about the victim's face for a few moments, she placed the basin and towel on the carpet by the wall and turned a malevolently satisfied look on Duke Jayne, who, sitting in a chair, had been watching her curiously.

"Who is he? Do you know?" was her question.

"I have never met the gentleman before," returned the other, in mock seriousness, "but I think I have seen his picture in the illustrated papers. He is the Hoodoo of Hepzibah."

"Don't you know him, really?"

"I will have to admit that I have not the honor of his acquaintance."

"Then I can enlighten you. I have lived in New York. You have not had that pleasure. This man does not know me, for I have been sharp enough to keep out of his way. He is Chickering Carter, better known as Chick, and if Nick Carter is a tough proposition, so is the assistant who lies at your feet."

Duke received this information with a laugh that would have curdled a timid man's blood. "Two of a kind and both in the soup. By wiping them out we are entitled to the biggest kind of a reward from the criminal element, not only of America, but of the world. Chicky, my son, how do you feel? Took too large a contract, didn't you? Got your figures mixed, eh? In your count all were fair days. Didn't imagine that it would rain in San Francisco. And you didn't know Nick was here?"

"Have done with your tomfoolery," spoke Cleo Masters sharply. "We may be standing over a volcano, for aught you know. This detective has probably had an agreement with the police. In that case the sooner we are out of here, the better for our skins."

Jayne's manner underwent a change. He rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming savagely.

"How is it?" he demanded, addressing Chick, "do the police know that you are here?"

"Find that out for yourself," was the defiant reply.

"That means that we are trapped," said the woman nervously. "Come, let us get out. There is the back way and a retreat to Chinatown. There we will be safe."

"I have something to do before I leave," replied Jayne, in a tone of savage resolution. "There is going to be a fire. You proposed it and I intend to burn up the whole outfit. My scheme has been knocked sky-high and I'm going to play for even. Nick, Chick, and the girl are booked for kingdom come by the match and kerosene route. Come, get a move on and help me. The closet trap will do the trick. We'll send Chick and Miss Garth down to rejoin Nick Carter and we'll let down after them that can of coal-oil in the kitchen. Before it drops I'll smash in the top, and when the can reaches bottom I'll throw a blazing rag, saturated with the oil, on it. Then we'll meander."

Cleo Masters' wicked soul did not shrink from the performance of such a fiendish deed. She assisted her partner in dragging Chick to the trap, and would then have raised the lever had not her villainous companion dissuaded her.

"Let 'em both go down at the same time," he said.

Florence Garth was lifted up and borne to the trap. She was in a fainting condition and it was found necessary to strap her to the unfortunate detective.

Chick had been gagged, and all he could do was to silently watch the proceedings which were meant to be preliminary to an awful death.

When all was ready the lever was raised and the trap descended. Muffled groans came up from the black darkness of the basement. Over the opening stood Cleo Masters breathing heavily.

She moved to the door of the living-room and waited until Jayne appeared with the can of oil.

In one hand was a hatchet. One blow cut a gash in the top and the can was dropped top downward into the hole.

"Now," said the conscienceless villain, in satanic glee. "Now for the last number on the program." He picked from the floor a rag which had been prepared for his fiendish purpose, and, striking a match saw the flames catch the oil-soaked cloth. A moment he held it in his hand. Then, with a low chuckle, he dropped it through the hole. A sheet of flame shot up and the two assassins rapidly retreated.

At the back of the house they found no one to bar their way, and were safe in an underground den in Chinatown when the ringing of engine-bells and the shouts of firemen announced that the building that had so recently been their residence was in flames.

CHAPTER VII.

OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH.

Nick Carter, during his long career as a detective, had many times been close to death, but he had never skirted so near the fringe of the unknown as on the afternoon which saw him descend, with catapultic force, the murderous trap in the closet of the house on Sacramento Street.

On entering the closet he had seated himself in the chair, but before he could make the discovery that it was stationary, the lever was raised, the door and the chair fell down and sidewise, and he shot to the brick floor, seven feet below, with stunning effect.

Had his head been first to strike the bricks his skull must have been fractured, but luckily he fell on his side, and his head, though it received a hard thump, was not seriously injured.

It was some time before he could stand on his feet. The place was dark and the air was foul, for there was no window and none of the ordinary means of ventilation.

Investigation soon showed that the hole was six feet square and that the only door was locked. Nick had keys of all sizes and patterns in his pocket and he had, besides, his invaluable picklock. After repeated trials the bolt of the lock was turned, but the door refused to open. The reason was obvious. It was barred as well as locked.

Giving up the idea of escape from that quarter the detective thought of the trap. The door with its treacherous chair had been closed, and to attempt to open it might be the means of bringing again to the front the villains who had doomed him to a horrible death. But the attempt must be made, for no other way of escape could be discovered. The walls of the hole were of stone and the door was of iron.

In a corner Nick found several grain-sacks filled with shavings. Their significance did not then occur to him. The time was to come when there should be given to him a clear understanding of their presence.

He placed the sacks in the middle of the room and standing upon them found he could reach the trap-door. But all efforts to move the door failed. With his knife he searched the cracks for the spring-catch with which ordinary doors are provided. But no catch, no bolt could be found. Then it occurred to him that the lever with which the trap was operated served a double purpose. Its own mechanism held the door in place, and the connection with the door must, of course, be made with the top and close to the wall of the closet. If he had been suspicious of treachery when he had entered the closet he might have discovered the rod at the back and perhaps have saved himself from the fall into the hole. But the sudden appearance at the front door of the villain he was in search of, the quick rush for cover, and the short time which elapsed before the trap was sprung, put all ideas save the one which comprehended the rescue of Florence Garth out of his head.

Nick Carter knew he had nothing with which to reproach himself. He was, indeed, in a hole. There seemed no possible way of regaining his freedom. The foul air would suffice to kill him if starvation did not.

For a time he paced the floor with compressed lips and a frowning brow. He hated to acknowledge that he was beaten. Suddenly there came a thought which brought the color to his cheeks. He went to the iron door and tapped loudly upon it. He had no fear that the sound would be heard in any of the up-stairs rooms. For nearly half-an-hour he tapped at intervals, and was about to relinquish his work in despair when an answering tap from the outside was heard.

Nick's eyes brightened. Hope looked out of them. He tapped quickly in return and then called out: "Who's there?"

The answer came faintly, but clearly: "A friend."

Then followed a rattling of the bars. The door was already unlocked. When it swung open the great detective saw the light and—Patsy.

The two detectives clasped hands, but not a word was said. Nick's feelings at the moment were too deep for utterance.

A noise above as of the movement of feet, succeeded by the faint sound of voices, caused Nick to quickly close the door to a small crack. What followed surprised him greatly.

The trap was again in operation.

Nick heard the fall of human forms and the groans which succeeded, and opened the door wider just as Cleo Masters walked away from the opening above. Luck was favoring him, although he knew it not.

Assisted by Patsy, who was still in the guise of a Chinese boy, the two latest victims of the murderous hate of Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters were carried into the larger room of the basement, where was both light and pure air. The door of the hole was again closed to a crack by which Patsy, at Nick's direction, was instructed to take his station. The hole might furnish further developments.

Chick and Florence Garth had fallen on the heap of sacks and had escaped without broken bones.

Nick had no time to express his astonishment over the identity of the two persons dragged from the hole, for the rescue had scarcely been accomplished before the coal-oil can and the lighted rag were dropped by Duke Jayne. The crackling of the flames as they shot upward through the hall, and the cry of alarm uttered by Patsy, announced the expected development had come.

It was then that the detective realized to the full the horrible death from which he as well as Chick and the millionaire's niece had escaped.

The cords which bound the two victims were cut and the gags removed. This done, Chick and Florence Garth were assisted to the outer door.

Rescuer and rescued were ascending the stone stairs leading to the rear yard when a door in the division tight board fence on the Chinatown end was heard to close from the farther side. Nick looked at Patsy, and the young detective, catching the situation, ran like a deer to the gate, opened it softly, and after one glance said excitedly to Nick, who was now by his side: "Two persons, a man and a woman, are just entering Chinatown."

Patsy was off like a shot, and Nick, with a shout to Chick, "Take Miss Garth to the Palace," followed on the heels of Patsy.

The detective reached the precincts of the Chinese quarter in time to see Patsy dash down a narrow alley which ended at the steps of a cellar. Without stopping Patsy went down the steps and disappeared from view.

Nick was hurrying toward the cellar when from out the shops and dens along the alley there poured a mob of Chinese.

The cries of fire and the rattling of engine wheels over the cobbles had brought them out.

One of them, a tall, muscular Mongolian, with the face of a highbinder, came out of an opium-joint with such precipitation that he collided violently with the detective. The walk was wet and slippery and Nick went down with the Chinaman on top of him.

A rough apology in fair English was made by the Chinaman, and the detective, who was still in the guise of the street laborer, was assisted to his feet. The fall had disarranged one of the sleeves of the Chinaman's blouse so that the arm was bare to the elbow.

Nick, who had never failed even under apparently the most trivial circumstances to make good use of his eyes, saw something on the bared arm which gave him food for thought. Midway between the wrist and the elbow was the facsimile, in India ink, of a tailless dragon, identical in appearance with the dragon which had been found in the locket dropped by Duke Jayne.

The tall Chinaman, after jabbering excitedly with a number of his countrymen, who seemed to regard him as a leader, moved away in the direction of the fire.

Nick turned to an aged Celestial, who stood trembling at the door of one of the shops, and asked: "What you call big man?"

"Big Joe, Mellican man callee him. Chinaman say, Sing Toy."

"What's his biz?"

The Mongolian shrugged his shoulders. "Him big boss."

At this moment Patsy reappeared. As he passed Nick he said in a whisper: "The cellar is a pocket. Nothing there."

He walked on and Nick followed him. At the mouth of the alley there were no Chinamen in sight. The fire had taken them all to the main street.

"They went into one of the joints between here and the cellar, Nick," said Patsy. "Another search and we've got them."

The young detective spoke with confidence. Nick looked away. "Have you ever investigated underground Chinatown?" he asked.

"Not all of it, no."

"Then you can have no idea of the holes and secret places, Patsy. A criminal, protected by the ruling highbinder tong, can safely defy the police and detective forces. An officer might search from now until doomsday without success."

"Is it a give up, then?" Patsy spoke with soberness, but Nick noticed a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes," was the reply, "I give up one plan in order that I may try another. Nothing can be done until the fire has been subdued. By the looks of things the firemen will soon be through with their work. You must remain here on guard while I arrange with Chief Dinan for a police cordon about Chinatown. I don't think Jayne and the woman will attempt to leave Chinatown for some days. They have found what they look upon as an absolutely safe retreat, and they will probably conclude to stay there until the way seems open to South America. But I hope to smoke them out."

"How?"

"I haven't time now to go into explanations. Later I will outline my new plan. While I am gone don't attempt any search in any of the dens along the alley. Your get-up is all right, but you are in a nest of highbinders, and once suspicion is aroused your life would be in danger. Besides, a bad break now might spoil all. We have holed the quarry and we can afford to wait a little."

A few minutes afterward Nick took his leave. The arrangement with the chief of police was made and then Nick, in a new disguise, that of a man about town, went to the Palace, where he found Chick, Florence Garth, and Fabius Winton awaiting him.

In the reception-room of the suite which the millionaire's niece had engaged, the situation was thoroughly discussed.

"The descent upon the secret hiding-place of Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters must be made to-night," said Nick, "and if my scheme works, we'll have the precious pair in jail before morning.'

"What is your plan?" asked Winton, who was a well-preserved man of sixty with a shrewd, kindly face and agreeable manners.

"To enter the nest of the highbinders as one of themselves, and in that way obtain the information that will enable me to put my hands on the blackmailers and murderers."

Florence Garth's lovely face grew pale. She began to protest, when the great detective interrupted her, reassuringly.

"The danger is slight," he said. "Let me explain. When I was in China last year in pursuit of an American criminal, who had been a Chinese interpreter in New York and who was, while in that city, at the head of a Chino-American organization of criminals, I became for the best of purposes a member of a new highbinder society called the Tong of the Tailless Dragon. Belonging to it were the most dangerous and bloodthirsty criminals of the empire. The Hip Sing Tong, the Bo On, and other societies of hatchet and gun men were as skim-milk organizations compared with this new power of evil. Soon its ramifications extended everywhere, until they reached close to the throne.

"Naturally branches in other countries having a Chinese population were established, San Francisco organizing the first and the most powerful. Of course it defies the white man's law and is a law unto itself. It dominates San Francisco Chinatown, and up to date the police force has been utterly unable to cope with it. Its secrets have never been given away; no traitor has ever been discovered within its ranks. Having said what I have, you must get an idea of the protection that it affords Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters."

"Why should this horrible gang protect them?" asked Florence Garth.

"Because Jayne is a member."

Chick whistled. "I am beginning to see," he said.

"I made the discovery," Nick went on, "when Patsy put in my hands a locket which Duke Jayne had dropped during the struggle on Geary Street. The locket enclosed a tailless dragon, such a one as members not holding official positions are entitled to have. The high officers are tattooed. I saw Big Joe's bared arm this afternoon. Upon it was the mark of the tailless dragon. When I clapped my eyes on the other dragon mark I understood why Duke Jayne and the woman, Masters, had fled to Chinatown. I saw that it would be the height of folly to then and there continue the pursuit. But I was satisfied with things as they were. Big Joe held the key to the situation, and I, though the rascal did not know it, held a club over the head of Big Joe."

Fabius Winton looked puzzled. Chick's face wore an inscrutable expression.

"It will probably surprise you, Mr. Winton," proceeded the detective calmly, "to learn that my position in the order overtops that of Big Joe. I was one of the charter members of the original organization in the province of Kwang Tung. I became a member for the purpose of ensnaring the criminal I had been pursuing, but to this day the members of the tong in China do not even suspect that they were imposed upon."

"I know," put in Chick. "You played the part so well that when you left China you received a send-off that shook Canton."

Nick Carter smiled. "They did give me a little dinner," he said. "But—soberly—they did something more. Supposing that it was my intention to proceed directly to San Francisco, they conferred upon me the title of Grand Captain—that's the English of it—which gives me precedence in rank here in San Francisco. Big Joe is the Grand Savage—an appropriate title, isn't it?—but he will have to take his orders from me."

"Do you think he will do so?" The questioner was Florence Garth.

"If he doesn't the other highbinder members of the tong will tear him all to pieces."

"That is," said Chick, "if they are satisfied that you are the real thing. And, of course, you are primed for a thorough show down?"

"I know the ritual by heart, I have all the grips and signs, and in my pocket are the documents in Chinese which present my standing and authority."

"If you succeed in arresting the man and woman is it your plan to take them East?" inquired Fabius Winton.

"I came to the coast for that purpose," replied Nick, "but the events of the last two days may effect a change. Two murders have been committed since the arrival in this city of Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters. I do not think Chief Dinan will permit me to take them to Chicago."

"I have not read the papers since I escaped from the clutches of these thugs," said Winton, "and therefore have heard of but one murder, that of the miner whose dead body was found a month ago."

Nick Carter welcomed the opportunity that was now afforded. "The second murder was committed night before last," he said quietly. "The name of the murdered man was Peter Frisk."

Winton started violently. His face took on an ashy pallor. "Peter Frisk," he gasped "I—I——" he could not finish the sentence, but shaking like a leaf looked first at the detective, then at Florence Garth. Suddenly, without a word, he arose and left the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PAINFUL RECITAL.

The abrupt departure of the Honolulan millionaire under peculiar circumstances caused Nick and Chick to sit like two automatons and stare at each other. They saw Florence Garth follow her uncle, and it was not until the two detectives were alone in the room that Chick broke the silence.

"The name, Frisk, bowled the old man over. What's your opinion, Nick? Is Winton up against it?"

"In one sense he is. Did you notice the look he gave his niece when I spoke the name of the murdered man?"

"Yes. There was terror in it."

"Not the terror of the criminal, though."

"No—o, but it showed guilt of some kind."

"Guilt that may have its root in a lie. I think that will be the explanation," said Nick, with a queer expression, which induced Chick to regard his chief in astonishment.

"You are wise, then, are you?" the latter said.

"In a measure I think I am, Chick. It is within your knowledge that I am pretty good at guessing. I have puzzled much over this Frisk matter and I never saw the approach of daylight until I caught that look on Winton's face. Then I fastened my eyes on the face of the niece. I had a glimmer of a startling idea and I sought confirmation. I found it."

"And what did you find?"

"I found a strong resemblance. In contour and expression, the expression of pain, I will say, for that was all I had to go by, the face of Florence Garth resembles the face of the man who was murdered in the basement of the house near Laguna Street."

"Great Scott!" ejaculated Chick. "And your inference is——"

"That she is the daughter of Peter Frisk."

More would have been said, but at that moment Fabius Winton and his niece reentered the room.

He was very pale and Florence was weeping.

Taking a seat in a corner with her head turned away from the three men, she buried her face in her hands while her body shook with grief.

"Florence insisted on returning," began Winton, with a poor attempt at self-control, "though I advised her to remain in my apartments across the corridor. I have not told her all, and she said it would not be necessary to go over the sad story twice, that one telling, with everybody present, would be the best course to pursue."

He took a seat and wiped his perspiring face.

After a long sigh, he said: "I am guiltless of the death of Peter Frisk, whose true name was Paul Garth. He was the father of Florence." He paused because neither of his listeners showed surprise. "You must have guessed the truth, Mr. Carter," he went on. "You must have noted the resemblance between them."

"I did," replied Nick, "and I have guessed more."

The two men looked at each other for a moment. What Winton saw gave him a feeling of intense relief. He knew that he had not only an honest, but a sympathetic and charitable man to deal with. His story was shaped accordingly.

"Paul Garth," the millionaire now spoke with some ease of manner, "left his family in England about fourteen years ago to try his fortune in Australia. He took passage on a sailing vessel which went down in a storm in the South Seas. All hands were reported lost. The years went on, Florence's mother died and she came to live with me. A year ago I received a letter from Australia from one Peter Frisk, who claimed to be the Paul Garth who had been looked upon for so many years as dead. He asked me to send Florence to him. I did not comply with the request, for I had but the bare statement of a letter written by a man who might be a fraud. But I answered the letter. I said that Florence was of age and could decide for herself; also that he need not expect to have entertained seriously any proposal that was not made in person. He might be an impostor. Let him show himself and if he had any rights they would be recognized.

"I said nothing to my niece about the letter and I heard no more in a letter-writing way from Peter Frisk until a year had elapsed. During the year, however, I learned, as the result of private investigation, that Peter Frisk had lived in Australia for over thirteen years and that he was the only survivor of an ocean wreck. Still I was not satisfied, and matters were in this shape when, on the day before the departure of the steamer for Honolulu, Florence handed me a sealed note which had been left by a man who had called in the morning while I was out. The note was from Frisk. He was in San Francisco and he had learned that I had arranged to go to Honolulu the next day. The note was to inform me that he, too, would go on the steamer and that the business which had brought him from Australia could be transacted during the ocean voyage. My mind was quickly made up. I must spare my niece the shame of meeting this unworthy man, for, father or no father, he was unworthy." Winton said this with an effort and an expression of mingled pain and sorrow. "And, therefore, I quickly despatched an answer to the address given in the note. I said that the business must be transacted in San Francisco; that I would defer my departure for the islands until I had disposed of his case. I wrote further that I would be at the hotel all the afternoon and the evening of next day.

"After the answer had gone I found Florence, and obtained her promise to depart on the steamer without me. The next day, after the steamer had gone, I kept the letter of the promise I had made in my answer to Frisk's note, but no one appeared and I received no communication until close upon midnight, when a message arrived. Frisk wrote that he had but just received my note; a very lucky thing for him, as the business might have been delayed. He had supposed that I had taken passage on the steamer, and knew not the contrary until he returned from the steamer to the house where he had been lodging. I did not quite understand the statement, for at that time I knew nothing of the accident which had overtaken the boat. I had been in retirement all day, as I have said. I had not seen the evening papers and my dinner had been served in my room. But I ceased to puzzle over it when I came to the point of the message. Frisk wrote that he had concluded to leave the affair to the management of his wife, who would accompany the message. I would find her waiting for me in the hotel court. I went down-stairs, met a veiled woman, and we left together. But little was said as we walked, for at her suggestion—she needed exercise, she said—we did not take cab nor car. No allusion to the relationship between Florence and the alleged husband was made.

"After half-an-hour's walk, the woman stopped in front of the basement stairs of a house at the corner of an alley, not many blocks from the City Hall.

"'Mr. Frisk is down there,' she said. 'I rented the basement yesterday intending to occupy it during his absence in Honolulu.'

"Without suspicion of danger I followed the woman into the basement, but the door was no sooner closed behind us than I was set upon by two men, one of whom was Duke Jayne. The other was a man who I at once recognized, in spite of the lapse of years, as Paul Garth, the father of Florence."

The sobbing in the corner broke out afresh. Winton's lips twitched and it could be seen that he was suffering intensely. But he knew that the terrible story must be told. He had glazed over the facts wherever he could. Now, at the culmination, there was no chance for evasion or softening. He had omitted to state what Nick Carter had divined, that Paul Garth had been a criminal in Australia, and that his letters had contained threats to steal Florence unless large sums of money were forthcoming.

"I knew," he continued, "that Paul Garth was a scoundrel, but I never imagined that he had sunk so low as this. The man did not speak until, bound and gagged, I had been carried into one of the rooms. Then he stood over me and said: 'I have wanted for a long time to have a talk with you. Now that I have you here, it will be a long time before you talk with any one else. We are going to bleed you to the limit.' I shut my eyes, but could not close my ears as he talked on. At last Jayne interfered, speaking roughly, and I was left in the room alone. It was bare and without shelves or fixtures of any kind. There I stayed until long after dark.

"It was about eight o'clock when Jayne—I did not know his name then, but I learned it later—came into the room with a light. Garth was behind him. The gag was removed and Garth asked: 'Ready to come to time?' I was so enraged over the knowledge of his duplicity and shamelessness that I told him that I would sooner die than give him one dollar of my money. He raised his foot to kick me, but Jayne took him by the shoulders and shoved him out of the room before he could wreak his wrath upon me. 'Now,' said Jayne, when we were alone, 'I will come to business. You are to have no dealings with that fellow who has just left us. He and I will soon dissolve partnership. I have no further use for him. You and I will do business together. I need twenty thousand dollars. You have that sum. It must change hands, otherwise the coroner will have a job. Do you follow me?'

"I am stubborn by nature. I hated to be held up in this fashion. 'No,' I said, 'for you not one cent. Kill me, if you will. I have reached the chloroform age and life is not as sweet as it used to be.'

"The villain let fall an oath and rudely reinserted the gag in my mouth. He need not have done this, for no cries that I might utter could be heard from without. It was his brutality that imposed this additional burden of suffering upon me.

"Toward midnight I was blindfolded and carried outside, where some sort of conveyance was in waiting. After an hour's drive the horse stopped and I was taken into the shack where Chick found me. I did not see Paul Garth after his summary ejection from the room in the basement. He was murdered after my departure."

"In dying he said that you were the murderer, Mr.

Winton," said Nick. "I am satisfied that savage malice induced the false accusation. He was killed by Duke Jayne because Jayne desired to rid himself of a tool that he had no more use for."

The detective would have modified this statement had Florence Garth been still in the room. But she had gone. When her uncle ceased speaking she arose and went into the corridor.

"I am satisfied there was a stronger reason," replied the millionaire. "Before Jayne left me to the care of the man he looked upon as his tool, he said that by paying twenty thousand dollars I would be getting off cheaply, for Frisk would have bled me for thrice that amount. 'Now he is out of the running,' he went on. 'He tried to do me up and no man can do that and not regret it. We have had you on the string for months, long before we left Australia. It was the game to corner you as you are cornered now. It was not the game for Frisk to play a lone hand and leave me to suck my thumbs. Fate [illegible]cked the cards into my hands when his Honolulu graft failed to work.' I didn't catch the deadly meaning of his words then, but I believe now that he wreaked a bloody vengeance on the man who had tried to play him false."

The day was closing. There was much to do before Nick would be ready to start for Chinatown on his dangerous mission.

Chick had his part to play and it was nine o'clock before all the details had been arranged.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE MIDST OF DANGER.

Big Joe, the king of the highbinders, Grand Savage of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon, sat in the doorway [illegible] an opium-den, smoking a cigar of the choicest Havana. He was not addicted to the popular vice of his countrymen. Behind him on narrow bunks reclined some slaves of the drug, the senses of all but one seductively befogged by the fumes that delight but to kill. All but one, we said. That one, a young Chinese, with a countenance of more than ordinary intelligence and shrewdness, lay stretched upon some dirty blankets, a pipe in his hand and with his eyes closed. He seemed to be sunk in a narcotic stupor, but ever and anon his eyes would slowly open and quick, alert glances would shoot out. The youth was feigning sleep. He was in the den for an important object. The proprietor of the joint knew him as Fong Chow, recently arrived from China. Nick Carter knew him as Patsy.

He had been on duty since Nick had left him and had not seen his chief during that period. He had, however, contrived to send out two messages, and to the last one a reply had been received.

A few minutes after ten o'clock a muscularly built Chinese, whose garb and bearing proclaimed high caste, came slowly down the alley and halted in front of Big Joe. The latter looked sharply at the new-comer and then, at a peculiar sign, placed his right forefinger on the bridge of his nose. The new-comer then spoke. Big Joe answered and arising led the way to a small, unoccupied room on the rear.

As the two passed out of sight Patsy raised his head, saw that the other occupants of the joint were past the line of intelligent comprehension, and immediately got to his feet.

A low, narrow corridor separated the front room from the room to which Big Joe and his high-caste visitor had gone.

Patsy sped noiselessly along the corridor until he reached the door. Beside it was a small table. Mounting the table the young detective climbed to the board ceiling of the room, the opening above never having been closed.

He did not place his feet upon the boards, but clutching the ridge-pole, which was less than six feet from the ceiling, raised his legs and went hand over hand until he had reached the opening on the other side.

With the utmost caution he descended to the floor. He was now in a closet partly filled with cases of opium. Two stood, one upon the other, in a corner.

Standing on the cases Patsy's head reached a point about one foot from the ceiling of the room. Directly above him was a trap-door leading to the roof. Now, as if with a perfect understanding of what was there, he removed from the wall by his head a wooden plug, and disclosed by the operation a round hole about two-thirds of an inch in diameter. To this hole he placed an eye.

What he saw made him smile. The high-caste stranger sat in a curiously carved high-back chair and on his knees before him, with his hands clasped as if in prayer, was Big Joe.

The conversation was being carried on in Chinese, but Patsy, who had learned the language, was able to understand every word that was said.

"Arise, Worthy Savage," said the sitting Chinaman. "Your lofty position shall not be disturbed unless by some act of insubordination. My stay among the Sons of Fire and Water must be short. I have only two days in which to investigate the conditions of the San Francisco Head. May I expect unquestioning obedience?"

"Your servant's tongue shall be pulled out by the roots, his eyes destroyed by a red-hot iron, and his worthless body thrown to the dogs if he fail to completely and instantly obey your illustrious commands."

"Your record of work done—where is it?"

"Here in this room, most Grand and Sapient Captain."

With these words Big Joe went to a side wall, pressed a concealed spring, and a small door flew open. From the receptacle thus brought to view, he drew out a thick book, and, dropping to one knee, presented it to his master.

The book was opened and for ten minutes the Grand Captain perused the record of blackmail and murder. As he returned the book to the highbinder, he said, as he tried to stifle his abhorrence: "It is well. The Grand Satrap shall know how worthily you have sustained the obligations which your great office imposes."

The book was returned to the secret repository and Big Joe with arms crossed awaited the further dictum of the Grand Captain.

There was a short period of silence. The Grand Captain's brows were knit in deep thought. Suddenly he fixed his piercing eyes on the Grand Savage.

"The membership here," he said, "embraces how many Americans?"

"None," was the reply.

"None?" in surprise. "Then how is it that the tong has been so long immune from attack?"

"Americans love money, most worshipful captain. So long as they will permit their palms to be tickled it is not necessary to initiate them into the mysteries of the order."

"But they have been admitted to membership in China. Have none of these foreign tongers ever come to this city?"

Big Joe hesitated, his eyes sought the floor.

"Come, an answer," spoke the Grand Captain sharply. "Remember——" The sentence was not finished, for the highbinder spoke.

"They came but a few hours ago. I was trying to recall their names."

"They? Who?" The Grand Captain was on his feet and his voice was stern and menacing.

Big Joe cringed and spread out his hands. "A man and a woman. They need protection and we have given it."

"Where are they?"

"In the secret council-house."

"They may be impostors, spies. I must see and talk with them at once."

"Your august worthiness shall be instantly obeyed. I will bring them before you."

The Grand Captain with difficulty controlled his features. "Will it be safe to convey them to this room?" he asked.

"Yes, your highness. They will not come by way of the front. Beyond is a closet and in that closet is a trap-door. They will make the journey underground."

"It is well. Let them be brought before me."

Big Joe bowed low and then started for the closet door.

As he opened it, Patsy, who had not counted on this move, was in the act of climbing through the trap-door to the roof. In his hurry it was impossible to act with his former circumspection. Though the noise he made was slight the highbinder heard it, and glacing upward caught sight of Patsy just as the young detective, his hands on the edge, was in the act of drawing up his legs.

He was looking downward and saw the highbinder just as the latter's eyes turned upward.

Instantly, before Big Joe could make a move, Patsy let go his hands and dropped. The fall was short, but surprise, for the moment, placed the highbinder at a disadvantage.

Patsy's legs enfolded Big Joe's neck like a horse-collar, and in the twinkling of an eye the fingers of Nick Carter's plucky assistant were about the enemy's throat in a viselike clutch.

The highbinder raised his hands and grasped Patsy by the shoulder. Then, though he was growing black in the face, he exerted all the strength he could command and would have brought his adversary's head with stunning effect against the wall, if the door had not opened quickly to admit the Grand Captain of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon. His body came in violent contact with that of the highbinder and an interesting mix-up ensued.

The happenings of the few moments that followed the Grand Captain's entrance into the closet surprised Big Joe to the point of stupefaction. The mighty emissary from the Celestial Empire, instead of coming to the aid of his subordinate, had taken the part of the spy.

Not until he was reduced to submission did Big Joe voice his astonishment and indignation.

"Is your servant a dog?" he snarled, "that he should be treated in this way. I come upon a spy and when I would have beaten out his brains you turn upon me and assist the enemy."

Patsy had the faith to believe that Nick Carter would rise to the occasion.

And Nick did. He had not reckoned on this interruption of his program, but his quick mind found a way to surmount the difficulty which it had raised.

In a tone of the utmost severity he addressed the angry highbinder.

"You have committed a grave error," he said. "This young Chinese," indicating Patsy, "is my secretary. He was in this closet at my order. The Grand Tong never takes anything for granted. Your administration had not been assailed, but prudence suggested that your honor should be put to the test without your knowledge. I am pleased to admit that you have thus far done nothing to raise a suspicion that you are unfaithful to the great trust which your superiors have reposed in you. If I assisted my secretary it was because his life was in danger. It seems that I arrived in the nick of time."

The highbinder's wrists and ankles had been bound with cords. Nick Carter released him and then said: "Is the explanation satisfactory?"

"It is."

The disguised detective fastened his eyes upon the highbinder's countenance. There was no hint in it of either fear or perplexity. Understanding, clear and untroubled, seemed written there.

"Then lead the way to the council-house. Valuable time has been lost. I will conduct the examination in the chamber."

Big Joe without a word opened the trap and went some steep, narrow stairs to the underground regions of Chinatown.

Nick Carter and Patsy followed.

At the foot of the stairs Big Joe lighted a candle, and guided by its dim light the way to the council-house was taken. The subterranean hole which was traversed was a noxious nest of filth. It was honeycombed with dark passageways, and rats scurried through the ooze and slime as the men picked their way through the mazes of the route. Sometimes the way led upward over the slippery roof of a vacant house, sometimes they passed through tunnels. At last they arrived at a tunnel of larger dimensions than any of those in their rear.

As they took their way through it Nick Carter was seized with an idea that afforded him no little satisfaction.

The tunnel was not directly connected with any passageway. Its entrance was cunningly masked and it had been reached in a roundabout manner, over roofs and down ladders, and lastly by means of a hidden shaft that terminated on a twenty-foot level.

Coming out of the tunnel Big Joe ascended a flight of stairs with numerous landings. The topmost one was about six feet below the wooden floor of some structure built above the ground. Here was another trap-door with peculiar mechanism.

On one side of the landing was a wall, and in this wall there was a door. The tall highbinder, after saying to the false Grand Captain, "the mechanism of the trap is in there," walked to the wall door, opened it, and went inside.

Before he reappeared, the trap-door swung downward and disclosed a large apartment flooded with light.

Big Joe climbed into the room and after him came Nick Carter and Patsy. The two detectives had not had time to take in the appurtenances of the room when a door opened and Duke Jayne walked in.

He nodded to Big Joe, and then looked inquiringly but not apprehensively at the Grand Captain of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon and his youthful secretary.

The introductions were being given when the form of Cleo Masters appeared in the doorway. As her eyes met Nick Carter's she turned pale, but, quickly composing herself, asked coldly: "Who are these men, Duke?"

As the master villain turned to face his associate she was fumbling with her necklace. For a moment the words he had been about to utter stuck in his throat.

Cleo Masters had given the signal of danger.

CHAPTER X.

THE TURNING OF THE TABLES.

"These gentlemen," said Jayne, as soon as his wits returned, "are representatives of the tong. They are recent arrivals from China. One of them is the Grand Captain, the other is his secretary."

Cleo Masters smiled sweetly and then, stepping forward, dropped on her knees in front of Nick Carter.

The disguised detective scanned her face closely and as she rose at his command he glanced at Big Joe. That worthy's countenance wore a strange expression. Nick's heart beat faster as he noted it.

There were chairs in plenty and at a sign from Nick all became seated. The apartment was in the basement and at the rear of some large building. The windows were above ground, and looking out the great detective had confirmed a suspicion that had crossed his mind when he entered the larger tunnel.

In the carrying out of a crafty idea the tong had located the council-house and place of refuge in times of danger in a building outside of Chinatown, but connected with the city of the Chinese in a manner well-nigh impossible of detection.

In this secure retreat Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters hoped to remain until the departure of the next sailing vessel bound for Callao.

When Nick Carter sat down he knew there was danger in the air. The woman out of the way, all must have gone well. Now she was a force to be reckoned with. She had probably penetrated his disguise and he might look for a hostile demonstration at any moment.

But no matter what the future portended, he would play his part as long as he could.

"I am here," he said in English with the London accent, "to investigate the claims of this man and woman. The man has given the signs of the tong and seems to be conversant with some of its observances. Passing for the present a rigid examination on ritualistic and practical lines, I will ask a few questions pertaining to the profession of each."

The woman smiled and Jayne dropped his eyes.

"First question: What has caused you to seek the protection of the San Francisco Head?"

"A desire for solitude," answered the woman.

Nick called up a frown. "No frivolity, if you please," he said curtly. "I demand a truthful answer."

"Fear of arrest on a charge of murder," spoke up Duke Jayne boldly.

Cleo Masters gazed at him in surprise. He met her look with one of dogged resolution.

"Who was the victim?" was Nick's next question.

"A detective."

"His name?"

"Nick Carter."

"He was a bad man," put in Big Joe. "Good thing you killed him."

The fraudulent captain of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon looked pleased when these words were uttered.

On the face of Patsy, however, a black expression was exhibited. He would have liked to have again his fingers about the highbinder's throat.

"How was he killed?" asked Nick. He spoke to Jayne, but his eyes were on the woman. There had not been opportunity for perfect understanding between the couple, and for that reason the detective believed that Cleo Masters would take the initiative when the time came for bloody measures.

"He was burned, roasted to a crisp." The words were hissed and the face of the speaker was the face of a devil.

Nick Carter breathed more freely. It was evident that Jayne, though he believed there were enemies in the room, had not the slightest suspicion that one of the enemies was the man whose death had just been referred to. Nick was about to put another question when the woman arose and addressing Jayne said slowly:

"You have made a false statement. Nick Carter is not dead."

"Not dead!" The villain was on his feet in an instant. "How do you know?"

For answer she pointed at the Grand Captain.

Jayne made a quick movement for his pistol, but his arm was caught by Big Joe, who said sternly: "No shooting in this room. Are you a fool?"

"Let go of my arm," growled the excited villain. "I must kill him. If I don't I am a dead man and so are you."

While these words were being spoken and while Big Joe's strong hands held the wriggling wretch, the room showed another tableau. Three revolvers were in evidence. Nick held one and it was pointed at Cleo Masters. The woman held another and its muzzle was on a line with Nick's head. The third weapon was in the good right hand of Patsy and it was aimed at the throat of the vengeful associate of Duke Jayne.

Big Joe's voice was again heard and he spoke with a coolness that surprised the two villains and made Patsy put an extra grip on his revolver.

"The Tong of the Tailless Dragon cannot be used," he said, "for reckless purposes. No person's death is ever decreed without discussion and understanding. An accusation has been made by this woman. She must prove her words before sentence can be pronounced. As the honor of the person who calls himself the Grand Captain of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon has been impugned I shall not permit him to speak until I am ready to hear him."

Having delivered his ultimatum Big Joe requested that all pistols and other weapons be placed in his hands pending the result of the inquiry.

"Come," said he sharply, as no one made a move to comply, "or I will call up a detachment of the tong. By pressing a button I can in two minutes fill this room with highbinders."

Dragging Duke Jayne with him he backed to the wall.

Then he beckoned to Cleo Masters. The woman, taking hope from his expression, glided forward, and when he extended his hand she placed in it the revolver that had been pointed at Nick Carter.

In the highbinder's blouse were capacious pockets. Into one of them went the pistol. A sign to the great detective and another pistol was secured. Patsy, watching these proceedings and not favorably impressed with the situation, would have made a stand against Big Joe, if Nick had not ordered compliance with the highbinder's request.

The last to yield was Duke Jayne. He gave up a knife as well as a pistol.

The muscular highbinder, with an enigmatical expression on his strongly marked face, directed Nick and Patsy to take seats on one side of the room. When they had done so he placed two chairs on the opposite side, and then with an expressive gesture looked at Jayne and the woman.

Having seen that the opposing parties were in their seats Big Joe sat down in a chair that rested in the middle of the room.

Duke Jayne was ill at ease, Patsy was nervous; Nick was placidity personified.

Deep silence reigned for some moments. The Grand Savage of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon seemed lost in thought. At last he said: "I must examine this woman in private. When I shall have heard her statement I will be able to determine whether to allow all or only a part of it to be used in the examination before witnesses."

Cleo Masters was about to speak, but an ominous look from Big Joe made her keep silence.

"You three men," the highbinder went on imperturbably, "will occupy the adjoining room while the private inquiry is going on. I promise you that it shall be short."

As he said this he nodded encouragingly to Jayne, and that sorely perplexed individual arose and went out of the room. On his heels followed Nick Carter and Patsy.

After the door had been closed behind the three men, Big Joe beckoned to Cleo Masters. There was a peculiar smile on his face, and noting it the woman took comfort.

She left her seat and came and stood in front of the highbinder. Big Joe rose to his feet and bent his head forward as if he desired to whisper something in her ear.

Instead of doing so he did a most amazing thing. He flung his arms about her, tripped her up and deposited her on the floor. She would have cried out in her terror and surprise but for the hand of iron which was placed quickly over her mouth. The hand soon gave way to a gag, and inside of a minute, despite her frantic struggles, she was bound hand and foot.

The sounds of a struggle in the other room sent Big Joe to the door. He opened it to see Patsy lying motionless on the carpet and Duke Jayne and Nick Carter locked in a deadly embrace.

A battle of giants was in progress.

Over the floor they rolled, first one on top and then the other, the tall highbinder looking on with the greatest interest.

Suddenly Patsy raised his head and began to stare stupidly about him. His eyes fell on Big Joe. An expression of deadly hate showed itself. He reached for his pistol. An exclamation of rage fell from his lips when the recollection of its loss came to him.

Nick Carter was now astride the body of Jayne with his hands gripped about the villain's throat.

Big Joe stepped forward and in another moment would have been beside the victor and the vanquished, if courageous Patsy had not sprung to his feet and barred the highbinder's progress.

"Keep away, you devil," the young detective hissed, and without a weapon, and weak, besides, from the blow which had floored him, threw his arms about the big man's body.

A roar of laughter, a pat upon the back that for a dozen seconds left Patsy breathless, furnished all the response that the highbinder made to the young detective's vindictive attack. "Fooled you to the limit, didn't I?"

Patsy fell limply to the floor.

"Chick!" he gasped. "The sufferin' Peter!"

And Chick it surely was.

He had had a part to play in the night's game and he had played it for all it was worth.

There was no time then for explanation.

The two assistants did not go to Nick's aid, for Duke Jayne had been handcuffed before Patsy had made his astonishing discovery.

Nick Carter had told Fabius Winton that he expected to have the two blackmailers and murderers in jail before daylight. His expectation was realized.

Patsy, before seeking his bed, insisted on an explanation of every point in the program of the night.

The program had been arranged by Nick Carter, but unforeseen circumstances had necessitated variations. Chick had been instructed to pay his attention to Big Joe and if possible personate him when such personation could be made effective.

In pursuance of this plan Chick, as a Chinaman, sought out Big Joe and representing that he was desirous of joining the tong induced the highbinder to accept one hundred dollars as a fee for making Chick's entrance into the murderous order an easy one.

At ten o'clock Chick made up to bear a striking resemblance to Big Joe, watched the door of the highbinders' joint—Joe, ostensibly, was the proprietor of an opium-den—and when he saw Nick, as the Grand Captain, go off with Joe he hurried to the door of the room in which the great detective and his deceived companion were holding forth in Chinese over matters connected with the administration of the Grand Savage. Patsy was then out of sight.

Chick waited until the voices ceased and he had heard the shutting of another door. Believing that Nick and Big Joe had started for the hiding-place of Duke Jayne and Cleo Masters, he forced his way into the room, passed through it, and cautiously opening the other door saw the head of Patsy, as the young detective was descending the stairs. Chick followed, and so cautiously that his presence was never detected.

He had not fixed on any definite plan until he crawled up the stairs leading to the trap in the council-house. When he saw Big Joe open the door in the wall, he beheld his opportunity. The platform upon which Nick Carter and Patsy stood was in darkness, for the highbinder had taken with him the only light.

With the noiselessness and rapidity of a snake Chick glided by Nick and Patsy and was within the cubby-hole from whence the trap-door was manipulated before Big Joe was aware of his presence.

The highbinder had performed his work and had turned to pick up the candle which he had placed on an empty box when Chick struck him a sledge-hammer blow behind the ear, and he went down like a log. It was the work of an instant to seize the candle and go out of the door. Once outside Chick shut the door, sprung the padlock, and then, without a glance at the two detectives, mounted to the room above.

He might have made himself known before leaving the platform, but his love of fun, coupled with the notion that Patsy had something coming to him, induced him to remain silent. He knew, however, before he had been many minutes in the room that Nick Carter had spotted him. Thereafter he acted with the knowledge that his every word and movement would be understood.

Having told his story Chick called upon Patsy for an explanation of his presence in the basement of the house on Sacramento Street at a most critical moment in the lives of Nick, Chick, and Florence Garth.

"It's all owing to Nick that I was there," said Patsy. "He went in at the front and I did my little stunt at the back. I didn't chase through the side yard, of course, for I might have been lamped from the windows. I hiked in by way of Chinatown, and that way of getting to the back chewed up over ten minutes. I tried the basement first, for I had swallowed the notion that I might find a stairway leading to the living-room. It was there, all right, and I soon found myself before a door bolted on the inside. I heard the sound of voices and caught a word now and then. Nick was not there, but Miss Garth was, and before long I heard Chick speak. Pretty soon there came a thump on the floor. Some kind of a circus had opened. I waited until Jayne spoke and then I knew that Chick was up against it. It would have been a fool plan to have tried to break in the door, for I am not bullet proof. So I ran down the stairs intending to enter the house from the front. When I reached the basement floor I heard a faint tapping. I located the sound and found Nick."

Big Joe was arrested about daybreak by a detail from the police office, and, assisted by the information which Nick Carter was able to give, the back-bone of the San Francisco Head of the Tong of the Tailless Dragon was broken.

Duke Jayne was tried for the murder of the millionaire miner. Nick, Chick, and Patsy unearthed evidence sufficient to convict, and the blackmailer and murderer was hanged at San Quentin prison.

Cleo Masters never appeared in court. She committed suicide two days after her arrest by swallowing the contents of a bottle of poison which she had concealed about her person.

Florence Garth is in Honolulu at the home of her uncle. She has not wholly recovered her spirits. The knowledge of her father's baseness will remain the one shadow of her life.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 481, will be "The Padlocked Mystery; or, Nick Carter and the Death-Trap Plot."

About the Early Numbers of **Tip Top Weekly**

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

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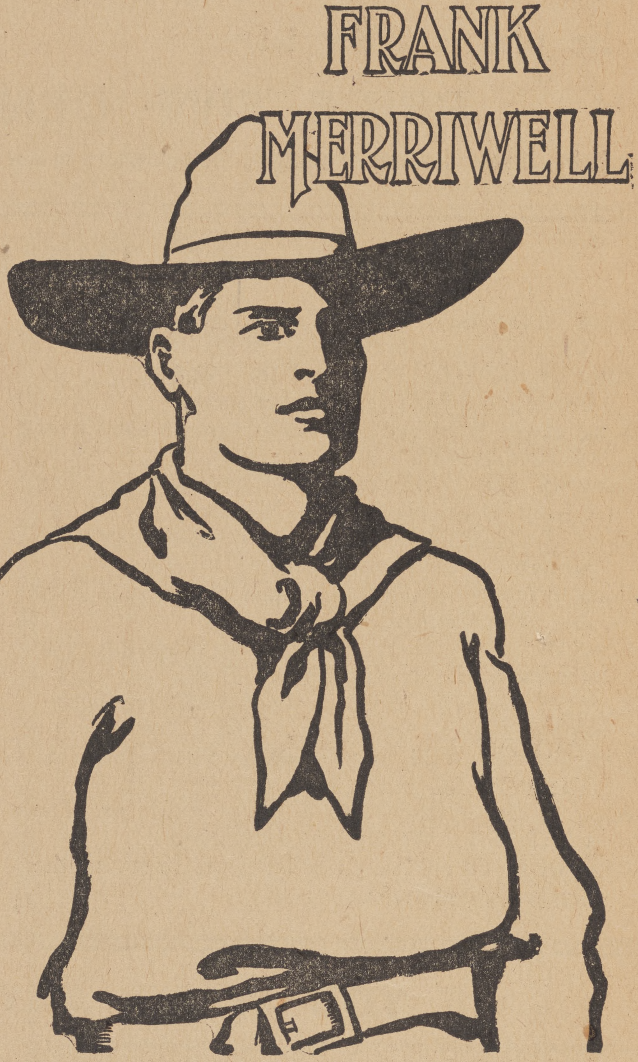

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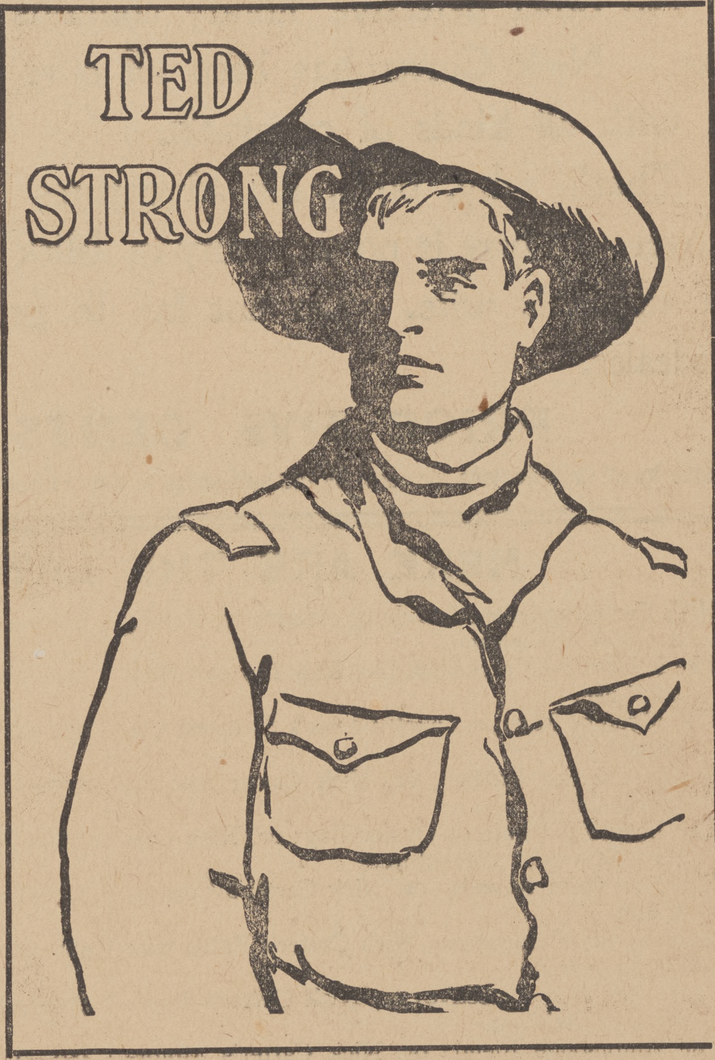

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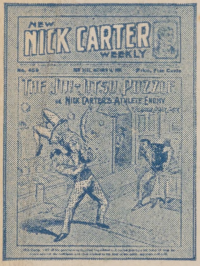
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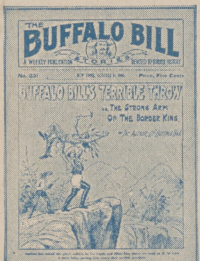
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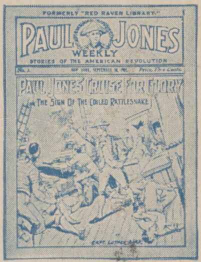
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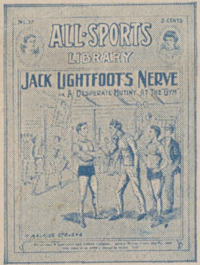
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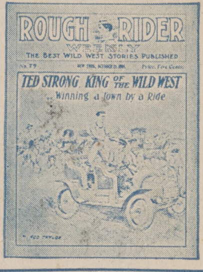
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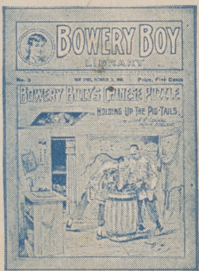
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